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KEI SAZANE

Illustration By
Ao Nekonabe

Our Last
CRUSADE

OR THE RISE OF A

New World



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Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World*
OR THE RISE OF A



THE SAINT DISCIPLES

A group of elite imperial soldiers with the greatest military potential who are the direct guard of the Lord. They obey the orders of the Eight Great Apostles, who have the Imperial Senate wrapped around their finger.

THE VORTEX

The location where inexplicable power materializes and spouts out of the earth. Those with magical potential who come in contact with its astral energy become mages. This is the source of the war between the Empire and the Sovereignty.

Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World* **OR THE RISE OF A**

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“I want to be a bigger person than someone who fights in a futile struggle with her own flesh and blood. I want to be grand—just like when I battled against Iska.”

Aliceliēse Lou Nebulis IX

The second-eldest princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty. She is a formidable mage with the astral power of ice. She is feared by the Empire as the Ice Calamity Witch.

Iska

A young soldier who is a part of the imperial army. He was the youngest boy in the Empire to rise to the title of Saint Disciple, which is given to those with the greatest military potential. He wields unique weapons called astral swords.

“These swords each have their own power. The white astral sword can release what the black one intercepts. And with them, I’ll change this war-torn world.”



“The captain is...small and cute, and I end up treating her like we’re the same age, but she’s really mature. We can count on her; she’s a reliable woman.”

“Fine. Captain Mismis is an adult... She’s shorter than I am, but she’s fully developed in all the right places. She’s got a big chest, too... Iska, that’s what you’re talking about, right?!”

“W-wait a sec, Nene!”

“So you’re telling me you like mature women, Iska...”

“I think you’re getting it all twisted!”

Mismis Klass

The commanding officer of Iska’s unit and a full-fledged adult despite her baby face. Her biggest flaw is her klutziness, but she has a strong will.

Our Last
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Ao Nekonabe


NEW YORK

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Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World 2

KEI SAZANE

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KIMI TO BOKU NO SAIGO NO SENJO, ARUIWA SEKAI GA HAJIMARU SEISEN
Vol. 2

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So E lu emne xel noi Es.

Accept me.

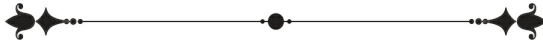
Sez nemne Es tury. Uhw kis melras wop kyel xel.

I bless you. This is my everlasting power.

vea Ez tis kyel ririsis phia.

All for you to reach the promised land.

PROLOGUE



Double Larceny

From the depths of the planet, below the bottom of the ocean, through the crust, past the mantle, *and beyond*—it rose from the core.

“Gauge activating. Detected.”

The southwest corner of Mudor Canyon. Observation Facility 47.

This Imperial gauge had captured a strange change in something surging underground.

“Seismic magnitude of one. Epicenter is more than thirty-two thousand feet below surface.”

“...That’s deep.”

“Detecting extreme heat. We’ve determined these tremors aren’t from the tectonic plates but something moving within the planet.”

“Seismic magnitude of two. Epicenter has risen. Nearing thirty thousand feet below.”

“That was fast. Could it be magma?”

“No active volcanoes in the vicinity. I doubt there’s any reason for magma to come to the surface.”

“Then, what is it?”

This conversation was going nowhere.

A mix of voices from men and women, superiors and subordinates, all jumbled together. Someone muttered quietly, *“Could it be astral energy?”*

Silence.

Everyone held their breaths and glared wordlessly at the gauge.

“A fountain...”

“Are you saying a vortex has formed at this location?!”

They were speaking about inexplicable power—*astral energy*.

Well, there was one thing about it that was clear. They had learned a century ago that astral energy could possess humans.

Those controlled by astral energy developed a mark on their bodies of unknown origin, becoming vessels of great power—akin to magic in fairy tales. This phenomenon gave birth to the first witches and sorcerers in history.

“A surge of what might be astral energy is rushing up to the surface!”

“It’s huge...”

“It’ll break ground soon enough. Based on size, I’m guessing it will only be a matter of time before a vortex forms on the surface!” reported someone with hints of anxiety.

A vortex was an exit point for eruptions of astral energy.

One hundred years ago, one of these vortexes formed under the Imperial capital, transforming thousands of people into witches and sorcerers. Later, they began to be persecuted, sparking a war between humans and those who could no longer claim to be the same.

The vortex could even be considered the source of their bitter fight.

“You’re saying it’s going to erupt here?”

“...Yes, and it’ll trigger the worst tug-of-war.”

Any who were bathed in astral energy would become witches and sorcerers.

Moreover, it was common knowledge that coming in contact with a vortex increased the strength of those who had already been possessed by this mysterious power.

“If the witches’ paradise...the Nebulis Sovereignty is able to capture the vortex, then...”

“The witches and sorcerers will become even more powerful... This is no joke!”

Under no circumstances could that be allowed to happen.

The continued existence of “humanity,” free from possession, depended on it.

This would cause a scramble for the vortex—one more terrifying than an ordinary struggle between nations over any other resources.

“Inform the Imperial capital immediately!”

“Detecting high amounts of energy from what we believe to be the site of vortex formation. Estimates indicate it should erupt in the next few days.”

“Requesting military backup. We must secure the vortex, no matter what!”

Two hours after that incident, the Eight Great Apostles who served as the supreme judicial organization in the Empire passed down their judgment.

“Dispatch one battalion from headquarters.”

“Also, notify the Saint Disciples.”

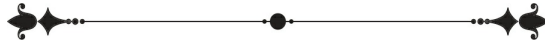
“Odds are that the Nebulis Sovereignty will mobilize their astral troops and purebred mages. We must consider making use of the eighth seat of the Saint Disciples, ‘Nameless.’”

Meanwhile, in the Nebulis Sovereignty—the “Paradise of Witches”—a firebird carrying Kissing Zoa Nebulis took flight. She was a member of the Grand Witch’s bloodline—in other words, a purebred.

The Imperial army against the astral troops. The superhumans called the “Saint Disciples” against the highest-ranking witches, purebreds.

The curtain rose on the violent scramble between humans and those who could no longer claim to be the same.

CHAPTER 1



As Elusive as Two Sides of a Coin

1

Known as the city of pleasure, Jurak was one of the neutral cities affiliated with neither the Empire nor the Nebulis Sovereignty; it was a luxury resort of grand scale that was home to the world's largest casino.

And in one corner of that casino, Iska had hunkered down in front of a slot machine where he watched three sets of symbols going around and around. He followed the spinning slots with his eyes.

"...And here!" Iska smashed three buttons in a row with an agile sweep of his hand.

One 7 and then another 7.

And then...another 7—that slipped past, coming to a stop at the image of a baby chick.

"What?! You're kidding! That was definitely a seven!" he screamed as the machine gobbled up the last coin of his salary for the month. "This machine has gotta be rigged..."

Iska was a seventeen-year-old boy with blackish-brown hair, born in Imperial territory and currently serving in its military—Unit 907 of the Special Defense for Humankind, Third Division, to be precise.

He had studied under the Empire's strongest swordsman and became the successor to the world's only pair of astral swords. He was a young swordsman—the youngest ever to be selected as a Saint Disciple, the guardsmen under direct control of the heavenly throne.

But why would Iska be gambling?

“Oh, there you are. How’s that one?” The person pitter-pattering toward him was a petite woman, trotting through an aisle of the casino with colorful neon lights.

Her features glowed with childish charm, and her blue hair curled away from her face, sweeping across her shoulders. Her lips were rosy and, paired with her hair, fitting for her sweet appearance.

“How’s your luck been holding up? I want us to hit the jackpot and get rich quick!”

“About that...”

“Did you already win?!”

“No. I just ran out of coins.”

“...Oh dear,” she lamented, turning her head up to the heavens.

“How about you, Captain Mismis?”

“I’ve been on a losing streak, too. I just needed one more for that card game! If I could have gotten one more from the same suit, I would’ve won with a thirty-to-one payout.”

Oof. She regretfully crossed her arms.

Everything about Mismis Klass screamed “teenager,” but she was actually twenty-two. She was the captain of Unit 907. In other words, Iska’s boss.

And the mastermind who’d brought him to this place.

“Now, now, Iska. No use crying over spilled milk!” Mismis boomed, forgetting she was right in the middle of the floor filled with other patrons. “We can make up for our losses with a jackpot! I mean, we’re at a casino! The place where normal folk can dream of getting rich overnight! Meaning...”

“Meaning?”

“I’m exchanging my money for more coins! We’ll win for sure this time!”

“Wait, Captain! That’s exactly how people go bankrupt by gambling!”

Mismis gripped a few bills in one hand and darted to the exchange counter.

Or so Iska had thought. She hadn't even taken a few steps before she slipped on the polished floor.

"Ah-woof?" She yelped like a puppy.

Iska watched her blankly, sighing deeply. "Are you sure we should be doing this? I know we're on break, but this might be going too far."

"The name of our mission? 'No Regrets.' What else can we do? An underling's duty is to follow the orders of the big boss."

"...Even if her orders are to gamble?"

"She always makes us do whatever brilliant idea she's come up with. Same difference."

Iska turned around toward the voice addressing him. Behind his slot machine was a silver-haired sniper studying an ongoing game of roulette.

It was Jhin Syulargun with his spiked silver hair, observant gray eyes, and masculine features.

He was Iska's colleague, only a year older, but the sharp features of his face and his tough leather jacket made him look older. Maybe.

At the moment, he was flippantly betting coins at random on a game of roulette—the queen of casino games.

"A life of pleasure with no regrets, huh...? Who blew smoke into her ears this time? Did one of those doomsday cults get to her or something?"

The croupier cast a ball that rolled and slipped round and round the wheel—stopping two spaces to the left of Jhin's pocket. His expression remained the same as a mountain of coins was taken from him.

"You're handling that well."

"There are a hundred and thirty spots on the wheel, and the jackpot multiplier is a hundred and twenty-eight. The system is rigged. The house always wins. You're going to lose whether you take yourself seriously or not."

"Oh, that's why you're calm..."

All the players visiting the casino dreamed of making a fortune. Well, except for Jhin. It seemed that from the outset, he had no expectations of getting his money back.

“Jhin!” Their boss dashed up to her unmotivated soldier after getting more coins. “How’s it looking? Did you win big?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’d rather you explain what’s going on.” Jhin stood up, starting to walk away from the crowds.

They were surrounded by nothing but gamblers. Though none of them would have listened in on their conversation, Jhin did his due diligence and made his way to the wall of the casino.

“I can’t help but feel weirded out that you’d bring us to a resort and tell us to ‘live it up with no regrets.’”

“Ack?!”

“What’s gotten into your head this time?”

“I-it’s just that...” Her eyes darted around their vicinity as her adorable face scrunched up as though she was about to burst out in tears.

“Risya said we might not make it home alive after we go on her mission! We need to have fun to our hearts’ content while we still...” She started to trail off.

“...Ah.”

“...C’mon. That’s what’s gotten into you of all things?”

Iska and Jhin looked at each other.

The source of her worries went back two weeks.

“For your next mission, your unit is going to be working for me.

“We’ll start by assembling next week. Then, in a month, we’ll begin joint training sessions.”

Risya In Empire, a Saint Disciple, had been given command for a special mission. Iska’s Unit 907 had been selected to participate.

Risya and Mismis spent their time at officer cadet school together in the same class, so they were friends. Iska and Jhin had trained under the strongest

swordsman in the Empire.

And the situation was exacerbated by Risya's fickleness—adding to their bad fortune.

Their squad had been called upon by one of the staffers that reported directly to the Lord, which made it sound like they were the chosen ones. But no one was *happy* to be selected for a mission under Risya's command.

...Not even Captain Mismis has been given the details of the operation.

...I imagine it's going to be high risk, high reward.

The strife between the Empire and the Nebulis Sovereignty had stretched over a century, with increased hostilities following repeated invasions on both sides. There was no doubt that this upcoming operation would tip the delicate balance between the two countries.

If they failed, they would die in battle or end up prisoners of war. The risks were simply that high.

"T-minus five days."

"No, four. Risya told me she had to push it forward by a day." Mismis held up an according number of fingers. "And she told me to enjoy one last vacation. I've heard that other units are moving ahead of schedule with their R&R at other resorts, too..."

"She's stupidly honest." The silver-haired sniper didn't even attempt to hide his sigh. "Risya should have known you'd be in a tizzy when you heard that, boss. Think about it. None of this is a big deal."

"Yeah?"

"We could die during *any* maneuver."

"That's not comforting in the least!"

"I don't care. I'm trying to say we'd be better off spending what time we have preparing for battle instead of goofing off. It doesn't matter if it's for a special mission or not."

"...Aaaaah. I—I guess you're right...but..." Mismis slumped her shoulders,

feeling out of place. Her hands were filled with the coins she had exchanged.

...Jhin's right.

...And there are a ton of cities the captain would have enjoyed more than this one.

Jurak was a watering hole that catered to the aristocracy. It was, of course, Iska's first time there. Mismis hadn't been to the city of pleasure before, either.

He didn't know how else to put it except that the place didn't seem very "Mismis-esque." Even if she was preparing to make this the last vacation of her life, he felt like there were better places to go.

"Captain, why did you choose to go to this place?"

"...Because of the Merkava made in Francesco. Model MI-62."

"The *what?*"

"The latest military vehicle."

Everything out of the captain's mouth was plain gibberish as she spewed some bizarre jargon.

"Um... You see?" She added a lilt to the end of her sentence, looking up at him bashfully. "...I thought we could use our jackpot winnings to place a special order for a tank. And that if something happened, we'd all be able to make it home alive as long as we were in it."

"...I see." He hadn't been expecting that.

Next to him, Jhin looked half-exasperated and half-reverent. "An unconventional visionary. I guess I'll give you points for not just partying it up."

"Really?!"

"Well, except there was never a chance that we'd get rich overnight."

"But it's not impossible, Jhin! There are tons of stories about ordinary people becoming millionaires!"

It seemed Mismis had regained her enthusiasm, given how hyper-animated she was again, lifting the coins in her hands high.

“We’re going to get rich today and join the ranks of the nobility! Tonight, we win it all! A kingdom and a castle! A beautiful home and a car—no loans—we’ll live the dream life in a manor that comes with a butler!”

“Did you just change goals?!”

“Just let her be, Iska. It’s not as though we’d actually—”

It’s not as though we’d actually win.

Before he could finish, a girl in a ponytail came bounding toward them from behind. “Iska, Jhin! Captain Mismis! Listen to this! Something amazing just happened!”

It was Nene Alkastone.

She wore her red hair up in a voluminous ponytail. This fifteen-year-old girl had large blue eyes and a merry smile that made quite the impression. Her outfit was made up of a thin shirt and short shorts suited to her slim and dainty form.

She was the communications expert of Mismis’s unit. Though young, she had made a name for herself as a top-class engineer in the Imperial capital—a girl with talent.

“Iska, take a look at this!” She thrust forth a pile of jangling coins close to spilling from her hands.

Iska, Mismis, and Jhin all went bug-eyed.

There were too many coins for anyone to think she had gotten them at the exchange. And first of all, the casino accepted only guests sixteen and over. They wouldn’t have even allowed Nene to exchange her cash for coins as a fifteen-year-old.

“Gambling as a minor?! Y-you can’t do that. You’ll get arrested!”

“Hmm? But, Captain Mismis, you had to show your ID because they thought you were underage. I wanna have some fun, too! ...Just kidding!” Nene winked in jest. “I got these coins from someone else. They shared their earnings with me.”

“...I’m sorry?”

“Yeah. They apparently hit the jackpot on that slot machine over there. And they said they wanted to give me a bit of their luck.” Nene pointed out their whereabouts with her gaze, looking intently at a large gathering.

There were probably about thirty or forty people huddled together. And it wasn't just customers but even curious dealers sneaking glances at the slots.

“See, Jhin? And what do you think of that? I told you that hitting the jackpot was totally possible.”

“And what good will it do you to act all proud? Tell me again when you've actually won.”

The captain prodded Jhin's ribs with her elbow as he maintained his exasperated expression. But there was a twinkle in the corners of his eyes as he regarded the winning slot machine with great curiosity.

“I can't play, so you can split these coins.”

“Nene...! You're way too kind. All right, I'm gonna make sure these coins don't go to waste! We'll get rich and then go out to eat barbecue!” Captain Mismis graciously received the coins, overcome with emotion.

Iska stared at her from his periphery.

“What's wrong, Iska? You don't want any?”

“Hmm. Oh, right... Thanks.”

Iska scrutinized the casino, observing the patrons and dealers gambling amid hoots of joy and sorrow.

It's too noisy here.

If he was being honest, he'd rather escape the hustle and bustle on his days off, appreciating his favorite painters in a hushed museum instead of spending time in this buzzing scene. That was where Iska's true interests lay.

And he knew there was another person, a girl, with the same hobbies as he had.

...This resort might be for the aristocracy...but there's no way Alice would be here.

The Ice Calamity Witch. Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX.

She was the daughter of the Nebulis queen and a rightful successor to the throne—a mage who took pride in possessing the strongest astral power in history.

Alice and Iska had met by chance on the battlefield. Iska was an Imperial soldier, and Alice was an astral mage.

This meeting should have been expected. They were from enemy countries, after all. The real problem was the two had come across each other outside the battlefield.

“What are you doing here?!”

“...Alice?!”

They’d watched an opera side by side, then gone to the same restaurant and shared a table, ordering identical meals.

They both appreciated art, and even their favorite artist was the exact same.

What ill-fated stars had they been born under for these coincidences to happen?

“...But there’s no way she’d be here.” Iska looked around the casino to confirm.

The serendipitous meetings between them stopped here.

There was a part of him that was relieved. They were from opposite sides of two warring countries and declared the other as an enemy. Even if they had met up again, it would have only been uncomfortable for both of them.

...But I wonder why...I feel a little bummed out.

There was no question that they were rivals, but...he had to admit that never before had he felt the way he did when he was with the Ice Calamity Witch—on the battlefield or in a neutral city.

Why had his heart fluttered during those times?

He couldn’t put his emotions into words. He still didn’t understand why.

“Iska, over here! There’s a seat open at the roulette wheel. Come and play

with me!”

“...Got it.”

Pulled along by Captain Mismis, Iska lowered his eyes to the game in front of him.

2

It was about an hour prior to the previous events.

At the entrance of the pleasure city, Jurak, the two girls looked up at the city gate.

“We’re here, Lady Alice! Jurak. A city known as a place for social gatherings among the aristocracy. The perfect resort area for you—just think of its ancient and storied history.”

Holding a parasol for her lady was an attendant with chestnut hair parted down the center and tied to either side. She appeared sixteen or seventeen and wore the plain white shirt of a housekeeper and a dreary skirt that reached to her ankles amid crowds of tourists in top-quality garments.

She wore no frills, nothing extra.

Well, to be fair, daggers, metal needles, and garotte wires were hidden in every inch of clothing on this attendant bodyguard—Rin Vispose.

“Look, Lady Alice. The twin towers over there are the Zelneta A. It’s a hotel serving as a symbol for this city. The structure is thirty stories tall. A world-renowned casino occupies floor five to basement level two. Amazing, right?!”

“.....”

“And to the left, behind the building, is their coliseum. In the past, gladiators would fight with their pride and reputation on the line. Apparently, spectating aristocrats betting on the winners was the origin of gambling. In modern times, that serves as a cultural—”

“.....”

“Lady Alice?” Rin tilted the parasol aside slightly and peeked at the face of her

lady. “Something the matter?”

“...Nothing,” Alice replied, bathed by the blinding sun as she placed a hand to her hip.

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX. She was the daughter of the current queen, Nebulis IIX, and a seventeen-year-old girl who was the vessel of powerful astral energy.

Under the rays of daylight, her golden hair gave off a faint glow, and her ruby eyes brimmed with dignified grace.

Her features were both beautiful and charming, with full red lips that let off a healthy sheen. Her dress for this incognito outing wasn't over-the-top, but there was something striking about her that made more than one tourist stop dead in their tracks when they saw her approaching.

But her grace was all for naught, as Alice was childishly puffing up her cheeks.

“Hey, Rin, I believe I said I wanted to take a breather this week, since I finished all my tasks.”

“Yes, Lady Alice. I think you'll be able to enjoy yourself to your heart's content.”

“...But I don't care for gambling at all.” Her cheeks ballooned sullenly, and she shook her head.

What she enjoyed were the arts, taking her time to view paintings in a quiet location or listening to music.

She had no intention of throwing herself into gambling. After all, she was the princess hailing from one of the two most powerful countries in the world. There was no need for her to make money.

“Even after I insisted that I preferred Ain, the city of fine arts...”

“You cannot go there.”

“Why? I wanted to see paint—”

“Are you planning on bumping into that Imperial soldier again?”

Gulp. Despite herself, Alice had frozen in place with her hand on her hip. Her attendant was too competent to have failed to notice.

“See, I knew it.”

“S-so what? My goals are perfectly acceptable. As a princess from Nebulis—”

“Lady Alice, you’re shouting.”

“...As a princess from Nebulis, my conduct has been nothing but proper.”

They were smack-dab in the middle of the road, bustling with passing guests.

Alice pressed herself against Rin and added in a strained voice, “Next time, I’ll settle things with Iska once and—”

“Do as you please on the battlefield. No need to meet him in a neutral city.”

“I want to. I want...to settle things between Iska and me, just the two of us.”

That’s right. There was one other reason why Alice had been in such a sullen mood ever since arriving in this city. She knew she wouldn’t be able to run into Iska no matter how much she wanted to see him.

...Like, I’ve only ever run into him in Ain, so I’ll never be able to bump into him here.

He was Iska, the former Imperial Saint Disciple.

Though his goal on the battlefield had been to capture a purebred, Alice knew his true aim was to lead the Empire and the Nebulis Sovereignty to peace. Despite being from the Empire, he’d called her an “astral mage”—and even set a witch free from an Imperial prison because she was powerless.

And this Iska was the first Imperial soldier who Alice had shared a worthwhile conversation with.

With him, she might be able to make her dream come true...to unite the world as one.

That’s how much she’d acknowledged his power, but...

“Come work for me. You aren’t the type of person who should side with the Empire.”

“I can’t. I can’t walk alongside you, Alice.”

Their paths were estranged.

The Imperial soldier and witch from Nebulis were incompatible. Which was why Alice wanted to settle things with him alone, at the very least.

She didn't care what happened in the end.

Would one of them fall? Would they both? Or would things end with both unscathed? She *didn't care* what happened in the end.

...I just...want to be alone with Iska again.

She wanted to forget all the quarrels between the Empire and the Nebulis Sovereignty and spend a peaceful moment alone with him.

"You cannot."

But...Rin, Alice's guard, would never allow that to happen on her watch.

"We cannot rule out the fact that the Imperial soldier may strike when your guard is down and kill you, Lady Alice."

"That wouldn't happen, because Iska is—!"

"Is what?"

".....Never mind."

She had almost accidentally revealed that she'd spent an afternoon admiring art together with him. She had kept that a secret even from Rin. If anyone found out that this duo had been side by side, viewing the same paintings, it would have sparked a scandal in the Sovereignty.

"A-anyway, I want to settle things with Iska someday."

"Of course. And I assume that will happen eventually, at an appropriate time and place."

"That's what I'm planning." Alice nodded, pulling a planner from her handbag. "In that case, I need to pen him in."

"Pen him in?"

"That's right. I wonder what time would work best for Iska. I'll be free next, next week on Mercurday... Oh, but my stars aren't in alignment that day. No good for an important event. I should make it the next holiday. I need to book the meeting place."

“...Lady Alice.” Rin was casting her a look of despondency for some reason.
“It’s not like you’re choosing the date and venue of a wedding.”

“A—a—a wedding?! B-between Iska and me?!”

“It’s only a metaphor.”

“__”

“Why is your face beet red?”

“Because you said something weird!”



For a moment, Alice had vividly imagined that which could not be spoken. But that was top secret information.

Ugh. Thanks for nothing, Rin. I was deep in focus, checking my planner, and now I can't even concentrate anymore.

"...Ahem." Alice pulled herself together and coughed. "Anyway, I'll put this aside for now. I don't think I'll run into Iska around here."

"Which is why I chose this neutral city."

"It's my first time at a casino. Hey, Rin, I don't know the rules for gambling."

"It's better that way." Rin raised the parasol for Alice. "Understanding the rules is asking to be sucked into vice. It would be best if you played without knowing anything—to win and lose in moderation. That is the correct way to pass the time at a casino."

"...But it isn't in my personality to lose."

"Of course. But, Lady Alice, I think it would be challenging for even you to win against sly and seasoned dealers. That said, I will assist you, of course."

"I'll win. That's what being a princess means."

"I wonder how long that confidence will last."

The two girls continued with their silly argument as they headed toward the largest casino in the world.

An hour later...

"Oh no. Is this machine broken?"

The slot machine had stopped right at 7, 7, 7.

Suddenly, every light on the machine started to blink on and off, whirring into action as a garish clamor of sounds informed everyone that she'd won the jackpot. Gold coins waterfalled out from the opening.

She watched the mountain of coins pile before her eyes.

"How odd." Alice cocked her head to the side. "Hey, Rin, it looks like the machine is broken. All it's doing is spitting out coins."

“...Lady Alice, it isn’t broken.”

“Oh? Then, why would it be doing this?”

“Because you hit the jackpot!”

The odds were one in several million.

This jackpot was won only once every couple years, even though thousands of guests gambled daily from dawn to dusk. In fact, the odds were stacked against them to the point that it wouldn’t be weird for ten years to pass with no major winnings.

This scene was remarkable enough for Rin to even raise her voice. “Lady Alice, you have to be...uh, more excited! Look—there’s a crowd gathering behind you!”

“But what am I supposed to...?”

Alice had simply chosen a machine at random, put in a coin, and pressed some buttons.

Even if others were making a ruckus about it, she didn’t feel like she had “accomplished” anything at all. Of course, she was happy that Rin was excited, and it wasn’t as though she couldn’t appreciate how thrilled all the patrons had become.

“But I can’t carry all the coins coming out of this thing.”

“Let’s call a dealer. I’ll have them cut us a check on the spot. Please wait.”

“Then I’ll take a short break.”

Alice glanced around the floor. Out of the hundreds of machines, only hers was flashing with light. She gathered that winning the jackpot was an unusual occurrence.

She heard the groan of someone losing at the slot machine on the other side of her.

“Ahhh... I’ve used up my whole bonus from last year.”

“What the heck are you doing, Captain?!”

“I knew this would happen. I told you, the house always wins. Take a close

look, Nene. Commit to memory this scene of the boss losing. This is the only thing that waits at the end of the road for a gambling addict. A prime example of a rotten adult.”

“I see. I get it now, Jhin.”

“Jhin... Nene... You’re both big meanies!”

It must be a customer from a group tour.

Over the celebratory clamor of the slots, Alice found it difficult to make out their conversation, but she gathered they were disheartened from losing.

“On to the next! I’m gonna play that card game! Jhin, you go to the roulette table.”

“...Diversifying the game selection won’t change a thing.”

“That’s not true. I’m always a good person. I’m sure I’ll win!”

“It’s based on chance—not morality.”

Their voices were fading into the distance on the other side.

I see. Their plan was to win back the money lost on the slots by trying their luck at another game.

“.....”

Alice was observing them leave when a girl with a red ponytail passed by looking bored. She might have been dragged along by the group playing slots in front of Alice.

And when she saw the heaps of coins, her eyes glittered. “Whoa, amazing! Did *you* win these, miss?!”

“Um, yes.”

Miss. It took Alice a moment to realize that the girl was talking to her, but there was no mistaking her gaze.

“Wooooowza! Congratulations!”

“...I’m sorry. It just doesn’t feel real yet.”

“It’s amazing! You could do anything with these coins. Like, buy candy or

clothes or, like, anything!”

Candy or clothes. To Alice, those were givens as a princess born and raised in the royal palace. But Alice knew that what was common to her was leagues apart from the general populace.

“Put out your hands.”

“Okay?”

“You can have these. I don’t need them.” Alice had dipped her hands in the piles of coins overflowing from the slot, scooping and releasing them into the palms of the girl with the ponytail.

“Whoa! Are you sure?”

“Yes. Think of it as fate. Use them as you please.”

“Thank you!” She dashed off.

As she left, Rin returned with the dealer.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Lady Alice.”

“Rin, I decided we’re not cashing out.”

“Meaning?”

“If I have been bestowed with good fortune, I can’t keep that to myself. It would sully the name of the royal family. Please distribute the coins to those around me, dealer.”

“...Absurd.” The yell hadn’t come from Rin. It was the elderly dealer. “Not even one coin for yourself?”

“Yes. I have no need for them.”

The fortune of the Nebulis Sovereignty was public.

As a member of the royal family, Alice wasn’t allowed to save or deposit money of her own. In exchange, she was guaranteed the life of a princess without inconvenience. Even if she brought the jackpot back, she could already see it being seized by the financiers.

In that case, she figured it wouldn’t be bad karma to spread her good luck

here.

“...I’ve been working as a dealer in this city for thirty years, but this is the first I’ve ever had a guest make this request.”

“Oh, wonderful. I would enjoy being remembered for that.”

“What a lovely young lady. Please tell me your name.”

Alice flashed her best smile. “Soon.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll know before long. When I unite the world.”

Alice took Rin and put the casino behind her, all the while listening to the cheers of the guests who clamored for her coins.

They departed from the casino.

“...Was I being too dramatic? I mean, I left without giving my name.”

“Of course not. Anyone who would reveal their identity in that situation would only be pretending to have class. Your judgment call was the picture of poise.” As she opened the parasol, Rin gave a reverent nod. “Lady Alice, what do you think about going to a café?”

“Right. I’m parched. Let’s have tea. I hope there’s room for us to sit.” She looked around the bustling streets.

As expected of Jurak.

It was a vacation spot that catered to aristocrats, lined with boutiques that fit the ambiance. There were cafés scattered among stores offering fine jewelry and high-end clothing. Each place was inspired in its own way, and Alice brushed across them with her eyes.

Her attention was drawn to a small, dark, cramped hole-in-the-wall sandwiched between the fancy stores.

“Hey, Rin. What’s that place? It doesn’t have a display case, and they don’t seem to be selling anything. But there’s a light on inside, which means it’s open, right?”

“A storefront for a fortune-teller. Astrology, apparently.” Rin spotted the

small sign for the store and pointed at it. “Hmm... ‘For before you try your luck. Welcoming all about to take their turn at a game of a lifetime to seek advice from this seasoned astrologer with forty years of experience.’ Ah, I see. Basically, it’s a shady business that targets people going to the casino.”

“Rare in this day and age.”

“Yes. I’ve seen a handful in the Nebulis Sovereignty, but you can count the number of active astrologers on your hand nowadays.”

The reason was simple: In the modern age, people had stopped relying on something as fickle as fortune-telling.

...I’ve heard there are astral powers that could do something similar...but even those weren’t supposed to be able to predict the future perfectly.

In the end, it all amounted to nothing more than superstition.

“But isn’t that what makes it fun?”

“Lady Alice?”

“Rin, wait here. I’m gonna get my fortune read.”

“Huh?! What’s gotten into you?! If you insist...then let’s request an astrologer to make a house visit at the palace!”

“No. If someone at the palace sees me with a fortune-teller, who knows what kind of rumors will spread.”

“...You have a point.”

“If anything, it’ll be a learning experience. Be right back.”

And what are you planning on getting a reading for? Before Rin could even think, Alice had already waltzed into the dimly lit establishment.

Partitions sectioned off the interior, creating smaller rooms in a way that made it impossible to tell who was having their fortune told.

“...I wonder if it’s okay for me to just let myself in.”

Some alcoves had their shades drawn. It probably meant they were occupied.

Alice poked around, looking for an open room, when she met the eyes of a

fortune-teller sitting in the back.

“Oh, what a charming young lady. It’s rare for the young to visit the shop.”

The fortune-teller was an old woman who concealed her face under a veil in a dark-purple robe. In her hand were cards for reading fortunes.

“Come, now. Take a seat,” she invited.

They looked at each other across the tiny table.

Alice had seen her mother, Nebulis IIX, receive a blessing from an astrologer for an auspicious year in a public ritual, but it had been years since Alice had her fortune read.

“And what would you like me to tell you about?”

“...Uh. Ummm...right.” Alice pretended to think through her options.

It was obvious she’d known what she wanted before she’d entered the shop, but now that the time had come for her to say it out loud, she felt embarrassed, almost.

“...I’m looking for someone.”

“Oh, a boyfriend?”

“B-boyfriend?! N-n-no, not at all! Totally wrong! Because Isk—”

Somewhere along the way, she’d almost bolted out of her seat, barely managing to keep herself from letting Iska’s name slip from her mouth.

“Oh no?”

“No!”

“But seems I wasn’t completely off the mark. I find most young folk are worried about their romantic prospects. Heh-heh-heh.” The old woman laughed as though she was amused. “Well, if you’d like, I can do a reading about the one who you await.”

“—” Alice nodded. “I want to know when we’ll be able to meet alone. And the place.”

“No problem. Leave it to me.”

Alice answered a series of her questions and picked out dozens of cards with illustrations of constellations.

“Hmm.”

“What is it?”

“An interesting star has come up.”

She was holding one of Alice’s selected cards and another one that she had chosen based on the former. It remained facedown.

“This card is one of a pair. The one above is yours; below that is the one I chose. When you put them together, they become a single constellation.” The astrologer looked down intently at the two connected cards. “The person you seek is close by.”

“Huh?” Alice instinctively clutched her chest with her hand. “I wonder if that’s true...!”

“Oh, it is. He is always near you. You are tied together by a destiny that no misfortune could overpower. If you’re looking for someone, this is the perfect time.”

“.....”

“Do you want me to examine the details?”

“...No, this is enough.” Alice shook her head, imagining the face of her attendant waiting for her outside. She placed the fortune-teller’s fee on the table and left.

“Lady Alice, how was it?”

“She said something plausible. But...”

Now that she was getting showered by the sun outside the store, Alice felt as though her head was coming out of a fog.

Is Iska somewhere near here? Is now the time to find him?

Alice’s heart had practically leaped out of her chest when she heard her fortune. But now that she was thinking back on it, the old woman hadn’t given her any details. It could have been just as likely about a family member or a

distant relative rather than about Iska.

“...Huh. I might have just gotten duped.”

“That’s the nature of fortunes.”

Alice let herself be led around by Rin, who held the parasol aloft as they walked.

...Iska wouldn't be around here...would he?

Alice wound up closely examining the faces of every single passerby. As she'd expected, Alice didn't see the face of the Imperial soldier whom she sought anywhere.

“Uuugh, I knew I couldn't trust a reading. ‘The person you seek is close by’? Gimme a break. I don't see him or anyone resembling him anywhere at all!”

3

The psychic's shop.

The princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty and her attendant had left...

“Woow...I feel like I've been hoodwinked.”

Emerging from that same entrance, Iska unleashed a huge sigh.

It was fine that he'd gotten his fortune read on a whim, but the reading didn't quite match up with reality.

“She said this was a chance to encounter the one I seek, but...there's no way Alice would be in that place. That was one hell of a trick. Anyone could parrot that stuff as long as they're ambiguous enough.”

That was the nature of fortunes.

He thought he had completely understood the concept when he walked in. But once they started their session, he had taken the results to heart. Blame the human psyche.

“Plus, it was packed. A bunch of people want a glimpse into the future, it seems.”

When Iska had gone in, all the rooms had been occupied, save the one next to his. And that last one had been snapped up while Iska was getting his reading. The supply couldn't keep up with the demand.

...I think there was a girl in the room next to mine... Her voice seemed young, close to my age...

With the background music of the shop, he hadn't been able to hear much, but there was a part of him that suspected the guest next door was a girl about his age.

"Heeey, Iska!" With Jhin and Nene in tow, the captain had snaked her way to him.

"Oh, Captain Mismis, did you finish buying your souvenirs?"

"All done. Here, see, I got a lucky cat statue to invite good fortune into my life! This will guarantee my jackpot next time—for sure."

"...Would you please give it up already?" Iska lowered his shoulders dejectedly as the captain balanced the small figurine on the palm of her hand.

On second thought, when Nene had gotten a share of happiness from the winner of the jackpot, they should have quit while they were ahead.

"We spent all of Nene's coins...and now we're in the red..."

"It's fine! We'll definitely win it back next time!"

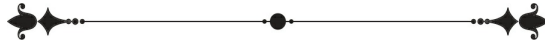
"Sounds like something an addict would say. Look, let's just go home."

"No, no, no, *no-no-no*! Let me go, Iska!"

"Not a chance."

Iska left the neutral city, dragging Mismis behind him as she threw a childish tantrum.

INTERMISSION



Double-Crossers

The Heavenly Empire, a realm united as one like a fortress also known as the Empire.

For a century, the nation had held claim over the largest territory in the world. Though a portion had been usurped to form the rival country of the Nebulis Sovereignty when the Grand Witch Nebulis had rebelled against them, the power of the fortress nation hadn't wavered in the slightest.

And the ones making all decisions for the largest country in the world were in the Imperial assembly. They gathered in an assembly hall five thousand yards below the surface of the Imperial capital, Yunmelngen, deep in its abyss.

"Good morning, Risya."

"We're pleased that you've answered our summons in the early morning. Please make yourself feel at home."

A steaming cup of coffee had been set up in front of her. It had to have been prepared by the best barista in the Imperial capital, but the Saint Disciple chose to remain silent, letting out a quiet sigh.

"Not a coffee drinker, we take it?"

"I prefer tea."

She was Risya In Empire. She was handsome, her sharp face framed by black glasses that made her look extra smart. She had a certain air about her, as though she was an influential businesswoman or the daughter of a big-shot CEO. If she was to be described in a handful of words, she would be called "an unparalleled jack-of-all-trades genius."

She excelled at academics, martial arts, shooting, and even strategic

command, graduating military school at the top of her class. As her colleagues competed ruthlessly with one another to become captains, she had already been recommended as a Saint Disciple two years before her graduation and currently worked as the right-hand woman of the Lord.

“But enough about that. I’d like to request an explanation for why I was summoned at three in the morning. To be frank, I’ve been suuuper-busy.” Risya turned her eyes up to the front of the room.

Light glowed off the monitors installed on the wall, where the silhouettes of eight men and women indistinctly floated into view.

“I can’t remember the last time I slept more than two hours in the last month. I’ve been living off hardtack and stringing together moments of consciousness with caffeine. That’s been my life because *you* gave *me* the role of commanding officer for your proposal.”

“We’re incredibly grateful for your help.”

“Indeed. If it weren’t for you, our research never would have come to fruition.”

They were the Eight Great Apostles.

The eight people on the monitors were the ones with power over the Imperial assembly.

Let’s say all 189 members of the Imperial assembly convened and voted for the “east.” If these eight said “west,” the steering hand would be westward-bound. If the Imperial symbol was the Lord, the ones who held the real power of nation were these eight people.

And to these eight people of great magnitude, this young Saint Disciple didn’t bother hiding her dissatisfaction.

“Yeah. I’ve been allowed to assist in your experiment as a commanding officer. Thanks to that, I’ve been totally deprived of sleep.”

The role of a Saint Disciple was to be the personal guard of the Lord, separate from the responsibilities of a general soldier, which were to invade the Nebulis Sovereignty. Acknowledging her skill as a staff officer, the Eight Great Apostles

had given a recommendation to appoint Risya as the commanding officer of a special mission.

"...So. You've got something new to burden me with?"

"Hmm. What could possibly make you think that?"

"It's a matter warranting a call to a Saint Disciple. What else could it mean? I'm guessing there's a situation that headquarters can't meddle in? I already have my hands full with the special mission; I can't deal with anything else." She shrugged—half-resigned to her fate, half protesting with her warning gaze.

"...You think Saint Disciples are just marionettes you can work till we break?"

"Of course not."

"We sympathize, but you're the most suitable person for this mission."

Please continue, Risya seemed to urge them.

"You've heard about the vortex situation."

"If it's about the report from Mudor Canyon in the southwest and Observation Facility 47—then, yes. I thought Nameless was already working on that one."

Nameless was the eighth chair of the Saint Disciples.

He had taken on the role of dealing with the Nebulis troops conspiring to take over the vortex. Risya had heard Nameless was already heading to the scene.

"We're still in need of supporting units."

"—" Risya frowned, pulling together their coded sentences to find the true meaning. *"...You think that a purebred will make an appearance?"*

"Yes."

"You mean that Ice Calamity Witch?"

"No."

"Apparently, a purebred who the Empire hasn't seen the likes of before. And dreadfully strong." Two of them answered simultaneously.

On the other side of things, Risya was staring into the air looking puzzled. "I'm

impressed you're so sure."

A trace of ridicule entered her voice. The Eight Great Apostles would surely pick up on it, but if she just told them it was their imagination, they wouldn't be able to do anything but overlook it.

Continuing to speak in that exquisite intonation, the Saint Disciple voiced her doubt. "A purebred will make an appearance, but it's definitely not the Ice Calamity Witch and will actually be someone else? You wouldn't be able to have that information without being very familiar with Nebulis. Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"The Ice Calamity Witch made an appearance in the Nelka forest, just as we predicted. We have the same level of confidence with our current information. We cannot make the source of our information public at this time."

"Not even for a Saint Disciple like me?"

"Patience. You will know in due time."

"...I'm looking forward to it."

The Eight Great Apostles had a terrible habit of hoarding secrets. They would scour the land and dig up every last secret of the Empire, but the world would end before they voluntarily revealed one of their own to the public.

In due time. That basically was a challenge for her to figure it out herself.

"Now then, let's get back on topic."

"As you know, the Saint Disciple Nameless has already headed to the Imperial capital. However, Nameless is tasked with eliminating the astral corps."

"In other words, we would like to dispatch additional forces to defeat the purebred."

"....."

I see. The corners of her lips twitched up when she got a better grasp on their intentions.

“Is this about him? The Third Division—?”

“Indeed. The successor of the Black Steel Gladiator, Crossweil. The current wielder of the astral swords. It shouldn’t be a problem for him to fight the unknown witch.”

“You’re saying I need to order Mismis? You want me to dispatch Unit 907 to the vortex?”

“You decide the pretense.”

“Maybe present it as calling in a favor from a friend. It matters not to us.”

“.....” Risya met their flippant replies with silence. “You’re telling me to do it because I’m close to Mismis? Is that why you’ve called me here?”

“The pretense is up to you.”

“You want to make me the bad guy?”

“And why would you have a problem with that?”

“That’s how you overtook your superiors and colleagues to rise to your rank.”

“.....” The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat could only remain silent.

She closed her eyes halfway. As her surroundings filtered into her eyes through her glasses, she continued to look up at the Eight Great Apostles with an unreadable gaze.

“Well, I’ll think up a way of asking her.” She turned on her heel. “But you’ll have to lay off me from now on.” With her back turned to them, Risya spoke in a joking tone.

“When it comes down to it, my employer is the Lord. Your demands are requests and not commands. I bow to only one—and one alone.”

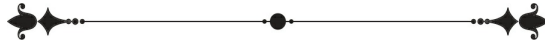
“Yes, of course.”

“We’re grateful. We’ll tell the Lord about your work.”

“No need.” Her heels clicked, echoing down the hard passageway as the Saint Disciple abandoned the assembly hall.

“The Lord sees everything. You don’t have to tell him. He’s already heard it all.”

CHAPTER 2



The Vortex

1

The special mission.

T-minus one day before the participating unit would commence their training.

Sector Three of the Imperial capital, Yunmelngen.

It was five thirty in the morning. The sky was dim in color with the horizon burning red in the early hours. Iska was walking through the courtyard of the fourth base, woken up by Captain Mismis summoning him for an emergency meeting.

“Weird. I don’t remember there being a meeting today.”

Their mission training wasn’t to start until the next morning. They were to prepare for it today, but that was it. There were no other plans on the schedule.

He couldn’t even think of a reason for a meeting. What was going on?

Iska reached the second floor of the fourth base. “Good morning.”

“...Yaaaaaaaawn. Goo...good mor...mmmmm...Nene.....,” murmured the captain, greeting Iska as he entered the meeting room. She was nodding off, trying to dispel her fatigue with sips of coffee.

When he’d gotten her call, she’d been half-asleep, and even now, she was still half-submerged in her sweet dreams.

“Good morning, Captain. It’s Iska.”

“...Uh...yes...Ne-ska...?”

“Captain?! Wake up. You’re fusing me with Nene!”

“...I’m...ugh, bad with getting up early... Worse than normal people... I’m gonna...sleep for another hour. Leave the rest up to that black cat in the neighborhood.”

“Please don’t go back to sleep, Captain—!”

But she’d collapsed directly on top of the long desk.

As Iska tried to shake his captain awake, the door to the meeting room swung open behind him.

“Oh, you’re early, Iska! Morning!”

“Guess Nene and I are last.”

It was Nene and Jhin.

In her hand, Nene was holding a hot dog, which was probably her breakfast. Jhin arrived chewing gum to wake himself up.

“Hey-o, Nene and Jhin... Sorry, but could you help me wake up Captain Mismis?”

“Huh? Hey, boss, seriously? Up and at ’em.” Jhin rattled her body rather violently.

Nene came closer with a transparent plastic canister in her hand.

“Jhin, pin her arm down. Just like that. Okay, time for an injection!”

“Yowwwwwwwwwwwww?!” Captain Mismis jumped out of her chair when the multi-needle syringe broke skin. *“Nene, what is that?!”*

“A sodium benzoate caffeine injection straight into your bloodstream. Wide-awake now, right? It’s a lot more effective to shoot it into your veins than taking a pill, apparently. I got it from a medical officer I happen to know.”



Nene seemed giddy as she put away the disposable syringe.

“And? Is it working?”

“Yeah...but it was the pain more than anything that woke me.”

“Oh, huh. I’ll make sure to mention that in the report. There’s a lot of room for improvement. Perfect.”

“Didn’t I beg you to stop experimenting on your own captain?!”

“Hey, boss, if you’re awake, hurry up and take a seat.” Jhin hunkered down in a chair in the back, taking the initiative to grab a sheaf of documents piled on a table against a wall and thumb through the pages.

“Wait, Jhin. Are those for Risya’s special mission...?”

“Right-o. Their contents are blacked out, which I assume they’ll fill us in at the training session tomorrow. Hmm. This page is a list of the selected units. Our names are here, too.”

Iska took hold of the same stack of documents. It couldn’t be more than twenty pages. Jhin was right. All hint of confidential information about the special mission had been censored. Iska zeroed in on the list of selected units that Jhin had mentioned.

“...This is...”

The commanding officer was the Saint Disciple Risya.

He had already heard about it from Risya herself. Iska was focused on the names underneath—the names of the assassination units that served the Empire.

“They’ve listed the Sixth Division. Look under the selected units.”

“Oh...yeeeeeah...” The captain replied without giving a real answer, picking up on Iska’s nonverbal cues. She wrapped her wavy blue hair around her finger. “As the captain, I’m in a position where I shouldn’t say this aloud, but I’m not sure I can come around to participating in a mission with the Sixth Division.”

“I mean, it’s the assassination unit.”

Mismis was under the Third Division, which was made up of dispatch troops.

In other words, they didn't have a permanent posting and acted as support for any battles that occurred in Imperial territory.

On the other hand, the Sixth Division contained assassins and intelligence units.

They deployed intelligence personnel all over the world and gathered intel about any hostile activity aimed at the Empire. And they carried out missions to eliminate purebreds in Nebulis...at least, according to rumors.

The truth was enshrouded in shadow.

Even Iska, an ex-Saint Disciple, hadn't gotten a chance to find out how the Sixth Division actually functioned.

"They're units that can't shake off dark rumors. I wonder what they're scheming by tossing us into the mix."

"...It makes me nervous." Mismis returned the papers to the desk, letting out a long sigh. "I know Risya trusted me with this mission, but I wonder if I'm the right fit."

"Testing, one, two, three..... Can you hear me over the mic?"

That seemed to drive away Mismis's sigh as the familiar voice of a woman rang down from the ceiling.

"Okay, Unit 907. Morning! Sorry for calling on you this early."

"Risya?!" Mismis jumped to her feet. With one hand planted firmly on her hip, the captain uncharacteristically chastised, "You're unbelievable, making us hold the briefing so early in the morning! Cutting down my beauty sleep..."

"Ah-ha-ha, sorry, sorry," the Saint Disciple apologized with a light tone. *"Let's start things off. Did you read the reports in the room?"*

"These things? Yeah. They're on our training session for the special mission tomorrow, right?"

"You can forget all that."

"...What?" Mismis's mouth was agape.

Her expression said: *What is my classmate and friend spewing from her lips?*

“And to be frank, I didn’t call you because of the special mission—”

“It’s to talk about *another one*,” Jhin finished in a muted tone, leaning way back in his chair. “Am I wrong, Miss Saint Disciple?”

“...Not at all. You’re right on the mark. How did you come to that conclusion?” she finally asked, as though she was amused to find him one step ahead.

Jhin’s eyes bore into the ceiling. “If you’re making us hold a briefing, that means you’ve got something you want from us.”

“Right.”

“And there were no scheduled plans for this meeting. I knew right off the bat that this had nothing to do with the special mission. After all, I know you’ve labored over the smallest of details for this mission as an adviser for the Lord. At this point in the game, there’s no way any unexpected situations would be cropping up. In other words, you wouldn’t call us to discuss the special mission, which can only mean it’s for another reason.”

“.....” Complete silence for a few seconds. *“Wow. I shouldn’t have expected anything less from you, Jhin-Jhin. You’re completely right up to this point.”* A faint applause emanated from the ceiling.

Jhin showed no visible signs of happiness, of course.

“Follow-up question: What am I here for?”

“There are three possibilities,” the sniper continued dispassionately. “The first is the vortex, and the second—”

“That’s good. You’ve got it right.” Her voice was straightforward, unassuming, as it echoed through the assembly room. *“Hmm. Jhin-Jhin, you’re amazing.”*

But they could almost see her giggling at them behind her praise. *“How would you feel about working for me in the future? I promise it’ll be twice as fun as this.”*

“No way. I can already see me having to suffer through three times as much pain.”

“...Your loss.” Her sigh came through to them. *“If you’re with me, I’ll protect you.”*

“...What are you trying to say?”

“I’ll tell you if you join me.”

“.....”

“Well, whatever. Mismis, did you pick up everything Jhin-Jhin was saying?”

“Ye-yesh?!” The captain jolted up, nervous.

“About the vortex. It’s under the jurisdiction of the Third Division, so I’m assuming they told all the captains about it already. And even if they haven’t, I’m sure you know, Isk and Nens.”

“Yeah. When it’s this big a deal...”

“I’ve heard about it, too.”

Iska looked at Nene and nodded.

They’d heard there had been enormous amounts of astral energy bubbling to the surface of ownerless lands that weren’t a part of the Empire or the Nebulis Sovereignty. Within a few days, the latent energy would erupt into a vortex.

“As you may know, the war started because a vortex appeared in the Imperial capital one hundred years ago. If not for astral energy, neither the Grand Witch Nebulis nor the Sovereignty would have ever existed.”

“Right...”

“Put simply, the planet is close to forming another one. If the Nebulis Sovereignty gets to it first, things’ll get pretty bad.”

The Empire was scrambling to uncover what would happen if the possessed were exposed to more astral energy from this new vortex. The hypothesis was that it’d increase their strength. There were even reports of a member of the astral corps becoming as strong as a purebred.

“When it comes to the power of a purebred, well, you know all about that, Isk.”

“...Yes.”

“The Empire is fretting that a purebred might become more powerful. I mean, if that happened, they’d become actual beasts. It’d basically be like having

another Grand Witch Nebulis. I'm sure you can imagine the Imperial capital becoming a sea of flames, right?"

It would be even worse than a tug-of-war between countries for any other natural resource.

"That's why I'd like to ask all of you in Unit 907 to put your all into this. I mean, you've already shown the world that you battled the Ice Calamity Witch and stopped her from advancing. I'm counting on you, all right?"

Iska thought to himself, *The Ice Calamity Witch... Is Alice commanding the astral corps storming the vortex?*

Of course, the chances were low. The battlegrounds between the two countries popped up all over the world. The probability that Alice and Iska would be dispatched to the same location was incredibly low.

Although he couldn't say it was impossible, seeing as how they'd become reunited with each other—as if called by destiny.

"Um..."

"What is it, Isk?"

"Did you get any intel that a purebred would be coming?"

"Of course. It's precisely why we're having this division make an appearance."

And the Ice Calamity Witch?

Did they have information that Alice would be coming?

"Um—"

"I've got to go handle business elsewhere, unfortunately. We'll have to cut this short."

"Whaaat? Wait, Risya!" Mismis was the one to speak. "Give us the details of our mission..."

"Come to the usual departure lobby in two hours. It'll take fifteen hours by car to reach the destination. I'll have one of my subordinates fill you in."

"You're not coming, Risya?"

“Me? Ah-ha-ha. No way.” She cackled as though the very idea was hilarious. *“Did you forget? I’m the commanding officer for the special mission. Training starts tomorrow, and I need to oversee it. I’ve got my hands full.”*

“...And what about us? We won’t be able to go to the training sessions.”

“I’ll take care of it later. I suggest you think about the new mission for now,” Risya advised, her voice laden with pressure and weight that had been absent until now.

“I told you to forget about the reports in this room. Focus on defending the vortex till the bitter end—or I won’t be able to guarantee that you’ll be able to return to the Imperial capital.”

2

The Nebulis Sovereignty.

Fearfully called the “Paradise of Witches” by the Imperial populace, this country was ruled by the descendants of the Grand Witch Nebulis.

Only one king had been born in the hundred-year span of the country. All the other rulers had been queens. There was a higher probability for potent astral energy to dwell in women.

That might have been the nature of the mysterious energy or simply a coincidence.

Either way, no one had divined a reason for this phenomenon yet.

“...I’m so bored.”

The Star Spire of the Nebulis Sovereignty was the closest garden in the world to the sky, a place brimming with the wafting scent of dewy flowers and grass. Upon watering the plants as her daily chore, Alice reclined on a pure-white bench in the hanging garden.

“With mass done before noon at the church and my instructor for royal studies postponing our lessons due to illness...and Mother working, and Rin cleaning my room...”

She had no one to keep her company. When she was a child, Alice would have played with her sisters, Elletear and Sisbell.

But somewhere along the way, she'd started to fear Elletear and get unnerved by Sisbell's presence.

...To become a candidate for the next queen.

...A battle among flesh and blood... I don't want that. I just want Mother to continue to be the queen forever and ever and ever.

Of course, that was nothing but a passing dream.

It was custom for the queen to pass down the throne to the next generation while they were young.

Would it be in ten years? Or five? It was only a matter of time before Alice would need to fight in the struggle for the throne against her blood sisters. It was exhausting even thinking about it.

"...Maybe that's why."

Maybe that's why she started to think about the face of a certain Imperial soldier—of Iska—when she fretted over her relationship with her own blood.

She thought about the first time she had fought Iska in the Nelka forest.

It had been a fierce battle. He'd managed to deflect her best astral attacks with his marvelous swordsmanship, pursuing her with the rabid ferocity of a wild animal. That was why she had even forgotten her position as a princess, concentrating to the fullest on fighting for her life.

She had looked only at Iska.

She had focused everything on Iska.

She had forgotten all her troubles and woes, panting out of breath, aware of the heat in her body, and detached from her physical form as though she'd been left floating, liberated from being the princess.

She didn't enjoy fighting, but she knew there was something unique about her fight with Iska.

"...And I still haven't returned this."

She surveyed the empty garden before secretly tugging a handkerchief out of her pocket.

“Um, here you go.”

The opera house in the neutral city of Ain.

Hearing her heaving sobs, Iska had offered his handkerchief, as he happened to be sitting next to her. She had done her due diligence by washing and folding it neatly, keeping it close to her, but she kept missing her chance to give it back.

...I wonder if he remembers...

...or if he’s already forgotten all about this handkerchief.

She had to give it back.

After all, she’d already told Rin that she had thrown it away. If she kept carrying it around, her mother might find out, which would be bad news.

“Oh, but the perfume...”

Because Alice had been hiding it in her pocket, it may have left a scent. She knew it wasn’t in either of their best interests for a man’s handkerchief to smell like a woman.

“...I think I can smell it. Maybe I should wash it again.” She brought her nose close to the handkerchief, as Alice couldn’t help but find this whole thing very weird. *“...Ha-ha, if Rin sees me, I’ll be in so much trouble.”*

She was sniffing a handkerchief she had received from a boy—and an Imperial soldier, at that. If Rin witnessed this...

“Excuse me, Lady Alice.”

“Eep?!” Alice leaped up from the bench, letting out a yelp that sounded weird even to her.

In the heat of the moment, she accidentally scrunched the handkerchief, ruining the neatly folded square.

“R-Rin? No, this isn’t what you think—” She whipped around to find an attendant in a black butler’s suit.

It wasn’t Rin but an elderly man. He lowered his combed pepper-gray head in

her presence.

“Apologies for bothering you. I was informed I would find you here.”

“...You’re...”

There were easily over a hundred attendants serving the royal palace in Nebulis. Alice was an outlier for having only one person serve and guard her. The other royal family members had multiple people attend to them.

“Nice to see you, Shuvalts. What business does Sisbell’s retainer have with me today?”

“Of course. I carry a message from Lady Sisbell for you.”

A word from her younger sister. Alice internally narrowed her eyes.

Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX.

Sisbell was sixteen, two years younger than Alice. Of course, she was undoubtedly of Nebulis’s bloodline as a mage who hosted potent astral energy. She was Alice’s younger sister—and one of her most formidable rivals to the queen’s throne.

“...From Sisbell, I see.”

Her sister was an eccentric: In the last few years, she had kept herself caged up in her own room, seldom sharing meals with anyone except for their mother. If she had business with anyone, she would leave a message with an attendant. Like now.

...A message? Even that’s rare.

...I think the last one must have been a year ago.

The message’s contents hardly mattered. Alice was dubious it would be good news.

“And what is it?”

“Lady Alice, are you aware of the vortex?”

“...What?”

“At Mudor Canyon to the southwest of the Sovereignty. We detected a

disturbance that appears to be astral energy. We're almost certain that a vortex will form in the next few days. We received intelligence that the troops are heading there from the Empire—"

"W-wait!" She thrust a hand out in front of her, stopping him.

She'd mentally prepared for a message from her younger sister and gotten a slew of unexpected information instead.

"A vortex? I haven't received that report."

"Yes. Others have just informed the queen and your elder sister, Elletear, in secret."

That meant this wasn't even known in the royal palace.

To astral mages, a vortex was a vital resource. For that information to be concealed... What could that mean?

"Zoa."

"....."

"The House of Zoa purposefully delayed the report, according to Sisbell."

Alice wordlessly bit her lip. She couldn't even sigh. Alice could only shake her head weakly.

...My head hurts... To think it's not just my relationship with my sister that's strained. This apparently extends to my other relatives, too.

In the distant past, when the Grand Witch Nebulis suffered injuries in a fight against the Empire, her younger twin sister, the founder Nebulis, had taken her place to command and construct the Sovereignty.

Years later, she was been blessed with three daughters.

"The House of Lou, the House of Zoa, the House of Hydra... I'm just baffled by it. Why is everyone conspiring against one another when we should be united in fighting the Empire?"

These were the three Nebulis bloodlines.

Like the current queen, Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX was from the House of Lou, which protected their country from the Empire while successfully keeping

casualties to a minimum within the astral corps—their kindred.

On the other hand, the House of Zoa was made up of extremists.

They were willing to make any and all sacrifices if it meant they had a chance to obliterate the Empire.

And last, the House of Hydra were the moderates. They might have been yanked into the fight for the throne between the Houses of Lou and Zoa, but they were flexible, serving the queen in any age.

“...Well, whatever. And where’s this vortex?”

“Mudor Canyon isn’t technically in our territory, but it’s close to our borders. In the past, we’ve positioned our astral troops there to watch for the enemy.”

“And I take it that whole region is under the jurisdiction of the House of Zoa?”

If that was the case, their house would have the final word—no exceptions. Except when it came to handling a vortex. That was a totally different story.

...The powers of anyone exposed to that energy will multiply...including Rin, the mages in the corps, and me.

The discovery of a vortex should have been immediately reported to the queen.

“And it wasn’t reported because...” Alice put her hand to her mouth in contemplation, even though there was only one lead. “...Because the House of Zoa is trying to monopolize this energy for themselves?”

“That was Lady Sisbell’s guess.” The specialist retainer nodded with a bitter expression clouding his face. “I am not in a position to comment as a mere attendant, but if you would humor me, I would say that the House of Zoa represents the greatest source of opposition to the rule of House of Lou, which includes Lady Sisbell and you.”

“...Agreed.”

“If we allow them to monopolize the vortex, the royal family members of Zoa and their astral corps could surge in strength. In other words—”

—It would ultimately affect the consecration ceremony for the queen, known

as the conclave.

The Zoa would be put in a position where they would have an advantage at the next meeting to decide the successor to the throne.

This was not something Alice could overlook as a member of the House of Lou.

“Of course. I should have known she would be *watching* their movements.”

“According to her *vision*, the Zoa are already working to secure the vortex.”

Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX the purebred possessed the astral power of burning light, which meant she could reproduce things that happened, almost like a mirage or vision.

She could trace back and re-create events up to twenty years in the past. Nothing happened within the royal palace without Sisbell finding out about it. This time, she had probably stolen a glance at House of Zoa’s activities.

“I wonder which one of them is headed over?”

“It’s Kissing.”

“—” Alice gulped down her breath subconsciously when she heard the name.

So that Kissing has finally made a move.

“I see. The favorite of their house. The details of Kissing’s astral power have been kept secret, but according to rumors, I’ve heard that it’s a strong one.”

“There’s a story of how Kissing slammed an astral guard at the royal palace in a mock fight and ranked above average or even higher among the three families at age fourteen...”

This was the superpower that House Zoa had apparently dispatched. There was no doubt they meant to monopolize the vortex by any means necessary.

“I believe I understand the situation. She’s demanding I head to the Zoa palace?”

“...I’m afraid so.”

“I never imagined my younger sister would insist I run an errand. But there is no time for complaints. I suppose I’m more suitable for this than Sisbell.”

She was the Ice Calamity Witch.

It vexed her that the Empire called her a monster, but that name came in handy in situations like this. Alice was the current queen's hidden ace. If she used brute force, even the House of Zoa wouldn't be able to respond without a plan.

"I bet you're watching my every move right now, Sisbell." Alice turned up to the skies, hardening her voice as she called the name of her absent sister.

"Honestly, you should come to me yourself sometimes. If you'd like, I'll talk with you alone as much as you want. I won't run or hide."

Alice turned on her heel, leaving the bowing attendant and the hanging garden behind her.

3

The mechanical utopia.

The Imperial cityscape was flushed red, blazing under the setting sun on the horizon.

Going back a hundred years, most of the wooden buildings in the Empire had burned down in the battle against the Grand Witch Nebulis. To overcome its painful past, the entire residential zone was now made up of fire-resistant structures.

"A town of steel, huh...?" Iska muttered its nickname, sauntering toward the dozens of armored cars before him and leaving the city behind.

They were at the military gate of the Imperial city. With the sunset in the background, the watchtowers were already beginning to shine dazzlingly.

"Iska! Over here, over here."

When he turned, he saw Captain Mismis peeking her petite form out from the shadow of a utility pole.

"Captain, you're early."

"Hee-hee... Well, there's a reason for that. I mean, with this as our mission...

Ha-ha. Heh-heh-heh?”

“What the—?!”

In front of him, the captain looked far from her adorable self—dejected beyond belief, exactly like a pessimist who despaired about the future. She had a forced smile plastered on her face.

“I thought we were going on Risyā’s mission—and that already had a slim chance of us coming home in one piece. But instead, here we are. Deployed to the front lines in the struggle for a vortex... Heh. Hee-hee-hee... I knew we should have focused on winning money at the casino and buying that darn Merkava. Made in Francesco. Model MI-62...”

“But that’s exactly how we blew through our life savings.”

Plus, if they were facing a purebred, jumping into a state-of-the-art anti-astral power tank wouldn’t change anything.

“You saw that Grand Witch Nebulis, Captain.”

“Nebulis?! Uh, ahhh, are you telling me that Nebulis is coming back *again*?!”

“It’s just a comparison.”

The Grand Witch Nebulis. The first girl to become a witch. The strongest astral mage in history. She’d been the one to turn the Imperial city into a sea of flames those many years ago.

Iska had believed the legend of Nebulis forcing back tens of thousands of Imperial soldiers. He had believed this was a threat of the past.

“I’ve become a witch—to drive the Empire to extinction.”

But the Grand Witch lived—lived in the form of a young girl for a hundred years with the power of her astral energy.

“...Ahhh. Yup. I remember it. I mean, it was suuuper scary. I could see embers rain down in Ain when I was taking shelter. It felt like the world was ending.”

Captain Mismis trusted her back to the utility pole and smiled wryly.

“But you still won, right, Iska?”

“Well... I was fighting for my life. I’m not sure I’d call that a victory.” Iska

shook his head.

...If Alice hadn't been there, it would have been impossible... I knew that founder was a real witch. All I can say is that her power surpassed human comprehension.

With the power of the Ice Calamity Witch Alice, Iska had finally managed to fight her off. Even then, the Grand Witch had gone back to sleep again, living somewhere in the Nebulis Sovereignty.

"Come to think of it, what happened to that Grand Witch?"

"Right! I made sure to report her to headquarters. I did my absolute best writing the report, but headquarters got mad at me for 'not taking a picture'... What do you think, Iska? Isn't that super unfair?" The captain puffed out her cheeks and continued in a harder tone.

"Like, how was I supposed to be taking pictures of that Grand Witch when my life was being threatened?! The only reason they even got this report was because I was alive to write it! Living was, like, the fundamental condition. How rude!"

"...It was exactly like that."

Captain Mismis had started to make everyone take refuge at the neutral city of Ain. As for Iska and Alice, the duo hadn't even had a second to spare as their fierce battle unfolded. There wasn't any way for them to obtain proof of the Grand Witch Nebulis.

"I paid my dues. Headquarters can decide for themselves whether to believe my report or not!"

"And about the vortex. Even if it's not Nebulis herself, a purebred might make an appearance."

"Duh, they're gonna go full throttle. Well, if it comes down to a struggle for the vortex."

Iska heard footsteps and a new voice behind him.

The sniper with silver hair lugged a case over each of his shoulders as he strolled toward them. He had the case for his sniper rifle on his right shoulder,

which meant the one on the left was probably for his ammo.

“We’re the second group, right, Nene?”

“Yeah! My friend from another unit said they’re already heading toward Mudor Canyon.” Nene popped her head out from behind Jhin.

She carried a container on her back, crammed with every set of communications equipment possible, trying to shove it into the armored car.

“A vortex, huh? I’ve only seen it on paper, but it’s one of those things that looks like a hole in the ground with light spouting out of it, right? Like, a light fountain.”

“Apparently,” Jhin agreed as he transferred the case of ammo to the luggage rack.

“A vortex is like a hot spring where astral energy has gathered. If you just jump into the hole, you’ll be bathed in astral energy. You’ve got to be careful, boss. If you slip near the vortex, you might just tumble right into the giant hole.”

“L-like I would do that!” Captain Mismis cried out, face flushed bright red. “... It’s not like just touching it would poison us or anything.”

Astral energy wasn’t different from air for humans. It was innocuous to inhale and touch.

Only a small part of the population could be possessed by the astral essence. That would happen only to those who were predisposed to becoming witches. It was believed that number was limited to 1 percent of the populace. If all humans could have been possessed, the Imperial citizens would all indiscriminately have become mages when the vortex had popped up on Imperial territory in the past.

“But it’s said the stronger mages can pass down their powers to their offspring.”

The bloodline of Nebulis crossed Iska’s mind.

The Ice Calamity Witch Alice, who was related to Nebulis, was a good example. Astral power could be inherited. If a mage was to become more

powerful at the vortex, there would be a high probability that their descendants would possess the same. Which would mean the Empire would have to fight against that threat for the rest of time.

...I need to stop them... If the Nebulis Sovereignty becomes more powerful, it will be impossible to make them negotiate with the Empire for peace.

He absolutely couldn't let them have the vortex.

On top of that, his other concern was the identity of the dispatched purebred.

"Captain, did you get any additional information from Risya?"

"No. Risya is going to be commanding the special-mission training tomorrow. She's super busy right now." The captain sighed in gloom as she opened the door of the armored vehicle.

Nene was in the driver's seat, and Mismis's appointed position was the passenger seat.

"A struggle for the vortex, huh? It'll become a full-on clash for sure... Uuugh, I pray we can get home safely."

"Even if we get home, Risya's special mission will be waiting for us. Which is also life and death."

"La-la-la, I can't hear you! I can't hear anything!" Captain Mismis plugged her ears.

Iska clambered into the back seat, observing her from behind in his periphery.

...We're pretty sure that a purebred is coming... Is it Alice?

He thought about the earnest blond girl.

"I—"

"I wanted to settle this with you without anyone else getting in our way."

Would the Ice Calamity Witch Alice actually come?

"....." He put his hand to his chest.

Thump, thump. He felt his heart rate increasing just a bit. Iska watched the scenery pass by him as the vehicle jolted forward.

The Moon Spire of the Nebulis Sovereignty.

It was a two hundred-yard walk down a corridor from the Star Spire, which hosted Alice and the House of Lou.

It was the royal palace of one of the three Nebulis bloodlines—the House of Zoa.

“It’s been three weeks since I was last here, I think. Since our last dinner together?”

“Three weeks and four days, Lady Alice.”

Alice came to a halt at the end of the hall, stopping in her tracks to gaze across the interior of the royal palace decorated with beautiful candelabras.

“...Strange.”

Under the light of the chandelier, Alice could see the passageway was completely devoid of people. She caught sight of a few attendants walking around. Why was it that she didn’t see any retainers or soldiers?

“I wonder if they’ve been struck by an epidemic. Maybe they’re trying to sleep it off in their rooms. This isn’t much of a reception for a visit from the daughter of the current queen.”

“Yes, let’s go with that, Lady Alice. A good jab. I stand by it,” the attendant with brown locks next to her said uncharacteristically coldly. “Or maybe we should ask if they’re busy digging up the vortex.”

“Too straightforward.”

“No, I think it’ll do... Even I’m offended by this.” Rin glared at the hallway, which was practically desolate.

And she could glower at them all she wanted, because the space was devoid of a single soul, but if someone had caught a glimpse of Rin’s attitude, they would instantly assume she was trying to pick a fight with the House of Zoa.

“The gall to secretly monopolize the vortex without telling the queen! Isn’t that as good as treason?”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“But if this report is from Lady Sisbell, there’s no room for doubt. The fact that the House of Zoa dispatched soldiers to Mudor Canyon is proof enough.”

As Rin was suggesting, their first move was to capture a royal family member from the House of Zoa and get a confession out of them. Their next step would be to hold them accountable: having them criticized by the queen and releasing a public statement to the people. If things went as planned, the House of Zoa would lose the trust of the people.

...They were probably banking on outwitting the Houses of Lou and Hydra... But this mistake will cost them.

“I have to talk to a member of their royalty. I wonder who would be best.”

“The current head of family. In that case..... *No.*” Rin’s voice grew thorny.

Her eyes went sharp, wringing out all emotion from them. With the expression of a guard trained as an assassin, the attendant continued to speak in an unusual tone of voice.

“That’s as far as you go, Lord Mask.”

From the corner of her eye, Rin glowered at something just a yard behind them.

It was a man in black wearing a mask.

They’d heard neither his footsteps nor his breaths.

But at some point, the tall man had managed to come stand behind Alice and Rin.

“Oh, spectacular,” he commented jovially.

With a *dagger still in his right hand*, he gave them a round of applause as if purposefully trying to provoke them.

“A keen nose. I wonder how you noticed me, Rin.”

“Anyone would be able to sense the murderous aura around you.”

“...Well, I could say the same for you.” With his dagger now stowed, the man shrugged with disinterest.

Rin had apparently sensed the sword aimed at Alice's back. She'd kept him in check.

"What are you trying to do, Lord Mask?" Rin monitored his suspicious behavior.

Alice turned to the man. "I can't believe you would turn a sword on me—the daughter of the current queen..."

"It's a misunderstanding. Don't look at me like that." He chuckled arrogantly. "It's self-defense. Because my astral power is weak, remember? If I don't carry this around, I just can't help but feel anxious."

He was On, the Lord Mask.

He wasn't the head of household, but he was unmistakably part of the Zoa bloodline—a sorcerer with astral power to create "doors" that traverse space. He must have created a door to sneak up behind them.

...I've heard he wears a mask to hide a scar...left behind from a burn from an Imperial firearm.

Not that anyone from the House of Lou had ever been able to confirm it.

"I haven't greeted you properly yet. Good day, Alice and Rin. What can I help you with?" he asked even though he surely knew the answer.

After all, the fact that there were no attendants or retainers in the hallway practically screamed the House of Zoa was anticipating their visit.

"Good day, Lord Mask. I haven't seen my relatives lately. I just wanted to see them."

"...Your relatives?"

"May I speak with Kissing?"

"Oh, it's been a while since I've heard you mention Kissing, Alice. I can't remember anyone in the family saying they wanted to see that child in years. I'm sure Kissing will be ecstatic," he asserted, upbeat. "...But I regret to tell you that Kissing isn't feeling well. Come again when she's better."

"Wouldn't that mean she dispatched her troops when she was sick?" Rin

pointed out. As one serving the royal family, Rin had responded in a way just on the cusp of overstepping her bounds.

“Lord Mask, the queen is aware of what is going on.” Alice continued her attendant’s thoughts. “Careful now. Be mindful of what you say.”

“Hmm... Oh, I see. This is all Sisbell, isn’t it? Her astral power really is something.”

“Our source doesn’t matter.”

No one could hide anything from Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX. Her younger sister had the power to bring obedience to those in the royal palace.

“I have a question for you. What is the House of Zoa doing with the vort—?”

“It’s either a buildup of magma or underground gas. There’s no proof that it’s a vortex.”

He was shameless.

To Alice, this was the most annoying excuse—because as the Lord Mask had said, they couldn’t confirm it was astral energy until it came spouting up to the surface.

“There’s liquid underground. All we know is that it’s hot. Wouldn’t it be best to dispatch the troops in case it’s a vortex?”

“Then, why delay the report?”

“Just now—” With a gloved hand, Lord Mask pointed at the passageway, down the path that Alice and Rin had taken moments ago. “Just now, the head of our house went to report it. A vortex is a precious resource, after all. We had to be meticulous in our research. That’s why it took a while to come up with the documents.”

“.....”

“Well, sorry. Seems we’ve worried you unnecessarily.” The masked man spread out his hands apologetically.

His behavior, feigning consideration, could be described only as that of a veteran tactician.

The war with the Empire.

The negotiations with the neutral cities.

The struggle among the three bloodlines for the throne.

This man had dozens of years of experience under his belt. With the vortex incomplete, they wouldn't get anywhere with verbal warfare.

"Lady Alice..."

"I've come to understand the situation, Lord Mask. Thank you for your explanation," Alice said quickly, silently exchanging a meaningful glance with Rin.

If they quarreled here, it would be a waste of time. She bowed and turned her back to him.

"I would advise you not to act in a way that draws attention."

"....." In her mind, she clucked her tongue.

It seemed he'd seen through *Alice's next steps*.

"What do you believe I'll be doing?"

"Going to Mudor Canyon. Heading to the expected location of the vortex. Right?"

She paused for a beat.

"Kissing will be more than enough to handle anything that comes our way. That child...is incredible, the equivalent of your presence in the House of Lou."

There was power behind his words—unwavering conviction, pride, and bottomless boldness.

"Kissing is still fourteen. I recall she was a cute, small girl when I first met her."

"Indeed. She has the genius to overtake you. That's what I believe."

Rin's eyes narrowed slightly.

He wasn't fooling anyone this time. This was obviously a challenge, daring Alice.

Kissing Zoa Nebulis.

The secret weapon for the House of Zoa. Alice had heard that she was an unparalleled genius of an astral mage.

“The planet is filled with rage,” he let slip out from behind the mask in a voice thick with emotion. “It wants us to use astral power to destroy the Empire. The current queen is too soft in her policy.”

Yes. This was the biggest political wall between the Houses of Lou and Zoa.

The current queen was proceeding with the war against the Empire with caution.

In contrast, the Zoa would willingly sacrifice everything to eradicate the Empire.

“I don’t even have to tell you what the Empire did to us in the past.”

“Why, of course.”

Alice was the daughter of the queen. Of course she’d been raised listening to “Legend of the Witch” as though a lullaby since she’d gained self-awareness.

And she had seen depictions of their oppression.

In the war, the Nebulis Sovereignty had stolen the pictures the Empire had taken of the prisons—of witches and sorcerers chained together with barbed wire. And every hour, the guards would run an electric current through the wires until they pledged their absolute surrender.

Their meals would consist of rotting bread and milk so spoiled that it had turned solid—leftovers from the Imperial soldiers. And the malicious servers preferred the mages starved.

If the Empire was punishing criminals, there might have been some room for understanding. But most of the astral mages were innocent. They had never committed a crime but were captured, tortured, thrown into cold cells only because they possessed this energy.



“I know well. To the point that I don’t even want to think of the pictures.”

“Yeah?”

“It was like they were in hell.”

Recalling the images that lingered in her memory was enough to make Alice want to vomit. To think discrimination could go this far. It was inhuman.

“That’s nothing.” A cold smile inched itself across Lord Mask’s face. “Alice, I bet you saw pictures from Altria Prison in the Empire.”

“Yes. And what about...?”

“The Empire purposefully left those behind. Just enough to make us believe their version of the truth. To trick us into thinking that was *the extent* of our persecution.”

“...What?”

Behind the scenes, there were records of worse things happening. That’s what he seemed to be implying.

“You only know about the lighter stuff. ‘Like they’re in hell’? That’s cute... How about I give you an example—?”

“I’m good.” She interrupted him.

...He’s cunning. He almost dragged me in...by the art of his conversation.

If rumors spread that Alice had been offered intelligence from the House of Zoa, she would be in trouble.

“The Empire acted in an unforgivable way. And whether I know the full extent of it is trivial, because I know we must fight the Empire regardless.”

“And I’m telling you that you’re not taking this seriously enough.” *Oh boy*, he seemed to say, theatrically shaking his head. “You’ll ‘fight’ them? You can’t even say you’ll annihilate them! Well, I guess this is falling on deaf ears, since you’re only thinking about it in terms of the current queen’s abilities.”

“Lord Mask—” Alice continued with a tempered voice. “Are you chastising my mother? I will report you.”

“There’s no use in doing that,” he replied in a gentlemanly way. “Because I’ve had this exact conversation for decades. I’ve had a very similar discussion with your mother, Alice... The current queen used to go off in the same way, raving to the Houses of Zoa and Hydra. She became less extreme when assuming the throne.”

“—” She didn’t have anything to say back to him. He was probably talking about a time before Alice had even been born. And though she didn’t have memories of it herself, she didn’t think he was lying.

“...If you’ll excuse me.” This time, she actually turned her back on him with Rin at her side, marching through the glass hallway.

...This really gets on my nerves.

...Exactly how long will this competition go on?

It wasn’t just with her sisters, Elletear and Sisbell, those who shared her blood. There were representatives from all three houses waiting for the winner of their family feud at the conclave.

A fight among flesh and blood. No, it was a toxic vessel where poisonous insects and venomous snakes were thrown in together, doomed to kill one another until only one was left.

“How pathetic...,” Alice rasped, vocalizing her emotions.

She wanted to be a bigger person than that.

Which would be...the queen who united the world. She wanted to embrace everything and hide nothing about herself and her opponents. She wanted to speak, fight, and settle things—naked, pure, free.

...Just like...

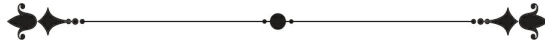
...Just like when I battled against Iska. The more she thought about him, the more she couldn’t help but worry about that Imperial soldier.

Whatever. She didn’t even care if she didn’t meet him in battle but saw him in a neutral city where they had to lay down arms.

“Ahhh, ugh! Seriously, where *is* Iska?!”

“Lady Alice! Stop saying things that could be weird out of context!”

CHAPTER 3



Betraying the Traitor

1

Mudor Canyon was an ownerless land in the middle of the continent, neither affiliated with the Nebulis Sovereignty domains clustered in the north nor Imperial territories to the south. This deep valley had formed out of a vast plateau, eroded down by a river.

It was an unexplored region even in the current age.

“No volcanic activity in the surrounding mountains. If hot fluid has been detected under the surface of the valley, it must be something other than magma... Huh.” Iska read the intelligence report aloud before turning to look out the car window.

Driving up the high altitude, he was starting to feel that the air had slightly less pressure and oxygen. The grass and trees grew sporadically. The ground was a shade of crimson, like red bricks. And with Nene behind the wheel, the car climbed up the steep mountain road at a terrifying speed.

“...It’d be better if it was underground gas or a hot spring.”

The vortex. A fountain of astral power.

It was a torrent of energy born from the planet’s core, worming its way past the mantle under the crust of the planet and erupting to the surface. It was a mystical spot of power that Iska and the others would protect with their lives.

“Captain Mismis,” he addressed to the front of him in the passenger seat. “About Risya’s recording from earlier. Could you play it again? I want to listen to it before we get to the camp.”

“Sure. I wanted to listen to it again, too.” Captain Mismis nodded, flipping the switch on the recorder gripped in both her hands.

A familiar voice started to play. *“—So long story short: I want you to protect it with your lives.”*

It was the message from the Saint Disciple of the fifth seat—Risya.

The recorder in Mismis’s hands, along with the intelligence report between Iska’s fingers, had been prepared in advance and left on seats of the armored vehicle.

“I think the Nebulis Sovereignty will come full throttle. I’ve had a Saint Disciple head over to counterbalance them. Mismis, you work under his command. You can ask the other captains who are already at the camp for detailed information.”

“All I’m saying is”—Captain Mismis childishly puffed up her cheeks as she listened to the voice—“if she was going to record herself, she could have just called me while we’re in the car.”

“But Risya said she was busy. You have to dedicate time to hop on a call.” Nene turned to Captain Mismis from the driver’s seat. “And you can listen to a recording as many times as you need. If she called, you wouldn’t have remembered anything, Captain.”

“Hey! So now you’re giving me a hard time, too, Nene?! I think I have a good memory!”

“Really?”

“I swear... But enough about me—keep your eyes on the road!”

A gigantic boulder bigger than the car was in front of them.

“It’s fiiine. See, if I turn right at the rock— Oops.”

“That way’s a cliff!”

Upon giving the handle a sharp turn, Nene suddenly stomped on the brakes.

It was the cliff of the canyon. If they’d gone one more yard forward, they would have been on the verge of free-falling down. The vehicle raised a cloud of

dust as it screeched to a stop.

“Wowza, Captain! Look! There’s a river flowing superfast down there!”

“Yeah! The river we were about to dive into!”

“We’re fine. We had a two-foot margin. I wonder if I could have held off on slamming the brakes for a little longer.”

“Please! Drive saaaaafely!”

“Um, by the way, Captain...” Iska tried soothing the captain, who sounded as though she was about to cry, and pointed at the device in her hands. “The recorder stopped playing.”

“Huh? That’s weird. I must have turned it off at some point.”

Jhin sighed grandly at her from the back seat, but it seemed the person in question hadn’t noticed.

“Secure or destroy.” The Saint Disciple’s voice was reproduced by the recorder once again. *“As you know, the astral energy from the vortex is strong. Even regular witches and sorcerers could obtain power to rival a purebred, for example. But there’s a limit to the energy—they can only use it as a resource in that location.”*

A vortex was a “single-use” resource.

Once it was stolen, there was no option to take it back—because even if they did, the energy would already have been consumed and dried up.

“Which means this battle is about making the moves first. Well, I think Mismis learned this stuff at officer cadet school, but I bet she’s forgotten. Jhin-Jhin, help her when it comes to this, please.”

“Never doubt a Saint Disciple. She hasn’t missed a single detail.”

“Jhin? What are you admiring her for? I remembered everything, too, you know.” The officer glared at her subordinate from the corner of her eye. “This battle is all about who gets there first! Our top priority is to secure it before the Nebulis Sovereignty. If that falls through, our next option is to stamp down the vortex. We’ll need to unleash our firepower to annihilate it before they have a chance to get stronger! ...Did I get it?”

Secure or destroy: Those were the two options. If they couldn't protect the vortex and it got into the hands of the enemy, they would need to blow it to smithereens so the enemy couldn't make use of it.

...This method is on-brand for the Empire...but I have to admit, we don't have other options when it comes to the vortex.

For that purpose, they'd come to the location carrying self-propelled rocket guns and plans to build short-distance missiles. And they had to prepare for combat with the astral corps, where Iska's gang would join as the support unit.

"—Oh yeah. Also. This hasn't been confirmed, but..."

"Huh?" Mismis yelped when Risya continued to talk. "There's more? Did I stop it midway through the first time?"

"...Guess we did the right thing by listening to it twice." The sniper chuckled wryly, flashing a glance at the machine with a flickering light. "I wonder how it goes."

"About the purebred. I'll tell you what I know. A witch is coming. And the Ice Calamity Witch who you fought in the past—"

Alice?! Iska almost shouted out loud, but he stopped himself at the sound of Risya's voice.

"—is unlikely to be our visitor."

Captain Mismis rubbed her chest in relief.

After all, the Ice Calamity Witch Alice was the strongest class of witch in the Empire. Mismis had been set free from the prospect of fighting this witch twice in a row at the very least.

On the other hand, Iska hadn't even realized that he'd held his breath and his tongue.

...Not Alice, huh...? And I didn't run into her when I was at the city of pleasure before this, too...

They'd bumped into each other a few times in the neutral city of Ain since their battle in the Nelka forest.

The series of coincidences was stopping here.

She was an enemy. He knew that.

Then, why did he feel lonely to know there would be no more chance meetings?

“Also, the witch isn’t cataloged in any Imperial records. She’s an unknown purebred. You may be relieved that it isn’t the Ice Calamity Witch, but she might be just as strong.”

“Hey! Risya!” Captain Mismis yelled, clutching the recorder so tightly that it started to crack under pressure. “You never told us that. An unknown witch?! B-b-b-but the probability of one stronger than the Ice Calamity Witch—”

“I can’t say it’s zero.”

“Not fair! Risya! You should have told me when you found out!”

“Well. I thought you would’ve been petrified. I just couldn’t stand seeing my precious friend in fear... Oh, and reminder that this conversation is a recording. I can’t address any questions or complaints.”

“I hate yooooooooooooou!”

“Hey, Captain?” Nene grabbed a handful of blue hair on her raving captain and yanked hard, as though pulling the reins of a horse. If anyone had to guess, she was probably trying to tell the captain to behave. “I noticed this earlier. But that recorder...”

“Yeah?”

“It’s not set to Play but to Call. See? The light isn’t red but green.”

“...Oh. So that means...”

At some point, they had connected to a line.

Which meant they had been talking to Risya instead of her recording?

“Oh-ho. I see, Risya. So that’s why the timing of your responses was perfect.”

“Guh?! Shoot! You figured it out?”

“Riiiiisya, I have something to ask you about. Do you have time?” Captain

Mismis had a dangerous smile on her charming face. “You might be the commanding officer, but not informing your subordinates of necessary information goes against regulations. About that—”

“.....” *Click*. They heard the line cut off.

“She hung up on us!”

Risya had likely made her prompt escape when she sensed impending danger—and they were never to get ahold of her again during their time working on their military operation.

“...Nene, you heard that, right? Drive safe. We have no idea when the astral corps might appear, and there could be a strong purebred lurking around.”

“All riiight.”

The armored vehicle accelerated. Iska looked up at the slope of the mountain, which was getting gradually foggy, and gripped his hand into a fist.

Mudor Canyon in the southwest. The first temporary base.

Iska’s group had arrived at the camp, where several dozen military tents were lined up in rows. They’d been set up by the first group who had arrived several days before them.

“One squadron. Thirty-two units. One hundred and sixty people,” Jhin reported back to Captain Mismis, upon completing a circuit around the base. “Half are from the Third Division. The others are from the Fourth. There are infantry, artillery, medical, and communication units. They picked out veterans with enough experience to fit this situation. I recognized some of the captains over there.”

“Reeeeporting back! I went and greeted them, too!” Nene came toward them from the opposite direction. “I got them to connect a telecommunication circuit with the comms department. We should be getting the information from the base coming to us now, too. I’ll hold on to the device for the circuit for the unit, and as for the captain’s one, well...”

“...Um, look, I’m bad with technology, so...,” Mismis said.

“Want me to hold on to it?”

“Love you, Nene!” She squeezed her subordinate, but with Nene being the taller one of the two, it was hard to tell who the real captain was. “I went around the base with Iska. It’s a full squadron. They’ve said that the one in the second temporary camp is backup. And also—”

“They’re already planning on dispatching another one,” Iska finished, informing Jhin and Nene.

Three squadrons. That was nearly a whole battalion. Plus, the Saint Disciple of the eighth seat had been sent out.

“I’m impressed they’d manage in this remote canyon.”

Jhin pulled out his sniper gun from its metal case. “You can practically see they’re taking any measure to get their hands on that vortex.”

“Right. There are a ton of people from the Third Division here. I know some of the captains. We just talked about seeing one another in a bit.” Captain Mismis glanced around, waving her hand vigorously back and forth upon catching sight of a captain coming out of a military tent.

“Noro! Over here! Over here!”

“Oh, Mismis. So that’s where you were,” chirped the other captain with a gentle expression.

She had slightly permed golden hair and eyes that made her look pleasant. She didn’t appear like she should have had any relation to the conflict at all, lacking the qualities of an Imperial captain in a different way from Mismis’s childish figure.

“Long time no see. You surprised me. Mismis, when did you get back to the Third Division? I thought you were with the Second at the Imperial capital all of last year.”

“Hee-hee, it happened recently.”

The captain called Noro pulled her into a hug.

They were both the same rank and in their mid-twenties, but based on height alone, they looked like a pair of sisters with a big age gap.

“Oh, Noro. Let me introduce you. These are my lovely subordinates. From the

right, that's Nene and Iska. The two of them are amazing and so kind. This one is Jhin. He looks charming and he's smart, but he's got a sharp tongue."

"...Hey."

"Oh my. I'm Shanorotte Gregory. Nice to meet you, Nene and Iska. And who can forget the sharp-tongued Jhin?" She giggled. "I graduated with Mismis from captain cadet school. And we were junior soldiers together. It's been so long. When we got our salaries, we would go to barbecue a lot together—though it doesn't seem like you've gotten any taller, Mismis."

"I—I *grew*! Like about three-quarters of an inch!"

"Really? I'm happy we've been reunited but sorry for the circumstance. I was just talking to another captain about how we've been thrown into this helpless situation." The blond captain crossed her arms with a troubled expression.

But she immediately did away with that weak attitude and snapped into better posture with a speed that seemed out of place with her easygoing tone.

"Look, Mismis, they're coming."

"Huh? What? Who's coming...?"

"Everyone! Salute!" boomed a voice, echoing throughout the entire base.

Those unit members working around the tents immediately stopped what they were doing and went into attention.

"Uh...huh? Ummm?"

"Captain, you have to salute—*salute*. If you don't, you'll get in trouble," Iska whispered to Mismis as he copied the other unit members, placing his raised right hand perfectly against his head.

They heard the low rumbles of footsteps, and three people decorated as supervising captains crossed over to headquarters—plus another man who followed behind the trio.

Captain Shanorotte continued to hold her salute as she whispered to Mismis next to her. "Look, Mismis. They're coming. It's the Saint Disciple."

"...Whoa. He's got an air about him. But I'm honestly a bit petrified."

Among all those in Imperial battle uniforms, he was in an odd outfit, wrapped in a dark-gray long coat from head to toe. He approached Iska's crew, undaunted.

He was the Saint Disciple of the eighth seat—Nameless.

The suit was made from adaptive camouflage, created by the Department of Suppression Weapons Development at the Imperial capital.

...I think I might have met him a year ago when I was a Saint Disciple, too... But we didn't really talk much or anything.

Nameless was with the Sixth Division. He'd been promoted from the Imperial assassins' unit.

"Eight new units have been added to our base today," reported a voice, which almost sounded robotic with electronic static.

It was rumored that under that photochemical suit, he wasn't actually human but an autonomous machine of a soldier.

"Nameless" stuck with him, even after being promoted to the Lord's guard. This assassin would be in command of the base.

"Let me start off by saying: I don't plan on giving this base a single concrete order." The electronic voice projected itself through the quiet base. *"With that in mind, I will tell you two goals for your mission—"*

"One. Secure the vortex before the Sovereignty.

"Two. If that fails, destroy the vortex before it can be used."

"And the last one—don't get in the way of my goal."

You got that?

Pausing as though to ask them that, the assassin who had risen to Saint Disciple continued. "My aim is to squash the astral corps who come seeking the vortex. Don't get in my way. Commit that to memory. That's all."

"—Dismissed!" shouted the young captain accompanying the Saint Disciple, who'd turned on his heel. "Get to work. Chop-chop. We request that all captains whose units have joined us today immediately report to the

headquarters tent for strategy.”

“...Huh? That means me. Well, see ya later!” Mismis scampered off.

The base burst with movement, abruptly starting to come alive again: There were people popping in and out of tents to deliver materials, captains giving quick encouragements to their subordinates, and subordinates dashing to the armored cars.

...This isn't a rare sight at a temporary base...but I dunno why the nervous energy feels...different.

“One of my friends in the communications unit told me that she felt suffocated here. I can see what she meant,” Nene observed as she hooked the key to the military vehicle on her finger. “If Nebulis gets the vortex, that’d mean the Empire would be in danger. If witches and sorcerers become even stronger, they say the war might even rage all the way in the city...”

“A standoff means we’re in a stalemate, after all. But this one is going to be a struggle. It’s a completely different story. Nene, get the engine warmed up. Once the captain comes back, we’re heading out right away.” The one to reply in a calm tone was the silver-haired sniper.

He was looking at the strategy tent far behind them, sweeping his gaze up as though staring at one of the reddish summits.

“The border to Nebulis is over there. The astral corps have probably already gathered.” He let a sigh escape as though he was cursing at them.

2

The southwest area of Mudor Canyon.

It was one of the unexplored regions, over one hundred and eighty miles long with a cliff over a mile deep. Some researchers insisted there would be at least several hundred new species for humanity to find at the bottom of the canyon... that was the extent of its vastness.

There were large predators living at the very bottom. From time to time, there were people who found tracks of ground dragons crawling along the

surface.

“—W-we’re gonna fall! *We’re gonna fall, Nene!*”

The military convertible was skirting the edge of that exact cliff, kicking up clouds of dust as it zoomed forward.

“Get away from the cliff! It’s so dangerous!”

“It’s fine! Don’t worry. Look, I’m making sure to keep an eye below the cliff. You check everything else, Captain.” Nene had hurled her entire body out of the driver’s seat, standing in a position that could instantly cause the car to pitch over the edge if she lost her balance.

“Nene!! *Ack?!!*”

“...Wait, Captain?! Don’t pull on me. That’s way more dangerous!”

The two girls started to raise a ruckus in the front seats.

In contrast, the two sitting in the back were silently continuing to observe the red-hued horizon. Iska had the measurement device. Jhin had his sniper rifle in his hand.

“Jhin, how do things look on your end?”

“I got nothing. I think the ground is cracked all over the place because it’s so arid here, but I don’t see any trace light that might be coming from astral energy. What about you?”

“Slight reaction.”

The measurement device in Iska’s hand would sense only the light given off by astral energy. The needle wouldn’t react to the light of the sun. It was weakly quivering to the right and left.

“It’s definitely here, but the signal is weak.”

The only way to find the vortex was basically to search every suspicious location exhaustively. They had to either measure the light emitted from the energy, like Iska, or look for places where the energy was flooding out of cracks in the ground, like Jhin.

“This is gonna be a pain,” muttered Jhin, gripping his rifle. “If the vortex is

nearby, its light should be overflowing out of it. Meaning your measurement device should be going haywire, but since it's only getting a slight reading..."

"I think its light is weak."

There were two reasons why that might be the case that he could guess.

One: The vortex hadn't formed yet, which meant astral energy was below the surface.

Two: The vortex had already formed, but they were far from it with their measurement equipment.

"Anyway, we've got to use a human wave attack to look for it, I think. Nene, how about you?"

"Hmm." The ponytailed girl continued to look at the bottom of the canyon.

Nene wasn't just horsing around as she dangerously peeked into the valley.

The vortex might have formed at the very bottom—where the sunlight couldn't reach it and strange predators roamed free. But it still needed to be searched.

"Nothing, as far as I can tell. I see stuff scattered around. Looks like animal bones." Nene craned her neck out. "Hmm... But the sunlight doesn't really reach this valley. Too deep. Jhin, you've got a grenade launcher in your luggage, right? And a flare?"

"Where do you want it to go?"

"Where I'm pointing. Yup, yup. Around that shadow."

There was a flash of light.

The flare pelted out from Jhin's grenade launcher seemed to be sucked below the cliff in the direction of her extended finger. It made a dry sound as it scattered like a firework. The dark valley glittered and lit up as if a new world for a few seconds.

"How was that?"

"...Okay, next, that cliff, where that big rock is casting a shadow."

He launched another one, then a third, illuminating her specified points one

after another. Next to her, Captain Mismis seemed to admire him as she watched over them.

“Whoa... That’s amazing, Jhin.”

“What is?”

“The trajectory of the flares is different compared to the bullets from a sniper rifle, right? Um...because of their air resistance, and they drop faster than normal bullets.”

“We just wanted to light things up. It’s not like I’m trying to be exact,” Jhin said, but it required so much skill to point the muzzle down, aim at the bottom of a windy canyon, and hit his mark.

Mismis knew what that took, which was why she’d made her remark.

“Jhin, that was fantastic. I knew you were a capable sniper, but I didn’t think you’d know how to use a grenade launcher. Did he study under the person you call your master?”

“Yes, of course.” Iska gave a slight nod in response when Mismis’s gaze settled on him.

They were talking about the Empire’s strongest soldier, Crossweil Nes Lebeaxgate—also known as the Black Steel Gladiator.

When he had been guarding the Imperial capital as the head Saint Disciple, he had scouted boys and girls from all over the Empire to train as his successor.

...That said... By the time they brought me to my master, Jhin was the only one left.

It was Jhin and Iska.

Just the two of them had gotten through his selection process—or, more accurately, *only* the two of them had been able to withstand the grueling procedure.

“But Master Cross said he wasn’t that great with guns. He could use them, but he mostly relied on his swords.”

Which meant the sniper Jhin had relied only on learning the theory from

Crossweil, developing his skills with his own hard work.

It went without saying that if Iska was asked to name the man he trusted the most, he wouldn't hesitate to say Jhin.

"I ran out of flares." Jhin acted as though he hadn't heard the conversation between Mismis and Iska, lowering the grenade launcher from his shoulder. "Want me to reload?"

"Hmm... I think that might be enough. Thanks, Jhin!" Nene shook her head, throwing her binoculars into the luggage rack in the back.

"There wasn't anything within range I could see, at least. Hey, Captain, how about we go there next? I think we could get a good view from that hill."

"Yeah, then, let's do—"

Just as Captain Mismis nodded...the communications device on her lap started flashing on and off. It hadn't made a peep until that point.

"Is it coming from headquarters? Nene, keep driving. I'll answer it."

The captain picked up the communications device. "Y-yes! This is Unit 907, Third Division. Mm-hmm, uh-huh...yes. We're on our mission to look for the vortex, but we haven't found any leads and no sightings of the Nebulis corps, either— Wait, *what?*" yelled the captain. "Nene. Stop the car."

The armored vehicle screeched to a halt. While the sound of the engine putted out, only Captain Mismis's replies echoed as she cradled the communications device to her ear.

"...Looks like something's up," Iska muttered from the back seat, noting her face.

Captain Mismis's smile was gone.

He'd seen her smile freeze in place when she was nervous during a mission, but he hadn't seen it slip off her face entirely.

"If it's bad news, the astral corps might have attacked. Or, worst case, they've already seized the vortex."

"Hmm... But..." Nene pulled out another device—not for captains but for

Imperial soldiers.

“If it’s that important, they wouldn’t take their time communicating it one by one to the captains. I think they’d contact all of us at once.”

“Huh. You’re right.”

Nene was intimately familiar with the workings of the communications unit. If she was saying this, she had to be right.

In that case, what was the report on?

“—Y-yes. Understood. We’ll head back to the base right away!” Captain Mismis nodded vigorously before slowly hanging up the call with both hands. “Uuugh.” She breathed out a labored sigh as she slumped back into her seat. “There’s a problem. A unit stopped responding while they were searching for the vortex.”

“...But, Captain, that’s not that unusual,” Iska commented as he exchanged a look with Nene.

The communication lines could be congested. Or the unit might have their hands full, unable to report back temporarily. Or something else. This wasn’t standard by any means, but the odds of it being an emergency were low.

“About that...” Captain Mismis was still gripping the device tightly. “Apparently, two units dispatched as the search party also stopped responding...”

“The hunter becomes the hunted, huh? Three units in total.” Jhin leaned forward from the back seat. “If it was just one unit, it would have been totally possible that they fell down the canyon, but it’s hard to believe that would have happened to three units. Maybe they got attacked by a giant wandering beast in the canyon or...”

“The astral corps—?” asked Nene.

“...That’s what I thought, too.” Captain Mismis interrupted the conversation between Jhin and Nene. “But then, there should be traces of a skirmish. They said they didn’t find anything in the area where they were last seen.”

There were no animal tracks, no signs of the mages pelting them with astral

attacks. And yet, three trained Imperial units had disappeared without a trace.

...That's strange. What could have happened to the three units for them to get cut off from communication channels or to not put up any resistance? Iska couldn't think of anything immediately.

"They're in the process of putting together search parties at headquarters for strategy. Which is why they want us to head back to the base, too."

"All righty. I'll take us there at full speed!"

The engine of their armored vehicle groaned once more, revving up as it turned sharply, hurtling toward the base.

"How creepy—for a unit to disappear without any resistance." Jhin cradled the sniper rifle in his hands next to Iska. "There's definitely something weird going on. What do you think headquarters will do, Iska?"

"Put together a search party of units surveying the vortex. Cease all independent action from tomorrow onward. Investigate the area in clusters of two or three units."

"Seems reasonable. They've got to play it safe. This situation is restricting available strategies." Jhin turned off the safety on his sniper rifle, standing in the back of the car and fixing his gaze somewhere in the distance. "...For now, we see whether that all-important Saint Disciple makes his move."

"This is unnecessary."

At the headquarters of the unit surveying the vortex.

They were in the center of the base, where several dozen military tents stood in rows. Someone was standing at the entrance of a conspicuously large tent.

"We've only lost three of our thirty-two units? Trivial! That doesn't warrant a search party. Continue the search for the vortex."

That was all the Saint Disciple Nameless had to say.

He turned his back on nearly two hundred subordinates standing at attention, leisurely disappearing into the tent and leaving a dumbfounded supervising captain in his wake.

“...Y-you heard him!” the captain barked with a stunned expression that screamed he was the one in most disbelief. He couldn’t think of anything else to say. He squeezed his hand into a ball, wringing out a “dismissed” in the loudest voice he could muster.

The stomping of combat boots echoed as the units scurried back to the armored vehicles, fully intending on carrying out orders to search the canyon.

“...This explanation is *way* below the bare minimum,” he said, the first to be openly derisive. “Three trained Imperial units. Thirteen people in total are MIA. We aren’t fooling around. To not be able to contact the units? This is obviously an extreme situation. How could that Mr. Saint Disciple think it’s ‘trivial’?”

“I agree. There’s something weird going on. Right, Captain?”

“Ye...yeah. This doesn’t really settle right with me, either. It’s almost as though they’re letting the three missing units die,” the captain of Unit 907 asserted, quietly but clearly, even though she knew others of her rank were judging her. “Of course, I’m not saying a rescue mission doesn’t come with its own risks. But we also don’t have anything to suggest this one might not be dangerous. And if we don’t know why they went missing, we might end up with more victims. We got a handle on why they disappeared... Well, that’s my opinion...”

“I completely agree.” Iska nodded, backing up the captain who seemed increasingly flustered. “And there’s a bigger issue at hand—beyond determining if this series of actions is the right judgment call. There’s obviously something off about Nameless’s command. As his subordinates, we’re supposed to obey without question, but he should really explain his decision in this case.”

“B-but...Nameless is already back in the tent...”

“I’ll go.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry. I think he’ll remember the face of his former colleague at the very least.” Iska made a quick beeline to the headquarters in front of him.

“What?! Wait, Iska, you couldn’t possibly—”

He pushed aside both the closed curtain doors, marching inside the tent and projecting his voice.

“Nameless!” Iska shouted.

Inside, the headquarters was scattered with desks and chairs for meetings. There were whiteboards set up at the very back, where a man was wordlessly enshrined in the darkness as though trying to become one with it.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”

“I have something to say. To that commanding officer in the back.”

The officers in the tent leaped to their feet at once—including supervising captains who ran the headquarters for strategy, those advising those leaders, and communications units.

Iska continued to saunter forward, ignoring that they’d all stood up.

“Who are you?”

“Hey, if you’ve got an urgent message, pass it through your captain—”

“...We’ve got a strange one here.”

Headquarters went silent. The soldiers who had come to stop Iska froze and then turned to the back in one almost choreographed movement.

“I forgot your name, but I remember your face.”

The Saint Disciple did not sit on a chair but a case of ammo.

From head to toe, he was covered in adaptive camouflage, scrutinizing Iska’s face and speaking in an incredibly bored tone.

It was unbelievable.

Everyone in headquarters stood stock-still in fear. For the last few days, they hadn’t heard the Saint Disciple speak to anyone of his own accord—until now.

“...Hey.”

“It’s difficult to comprehend the whims of the Eight Great Apostles,” the Saint Disciple muttered as though spitting it out. *“The traitor of the Empire dares to show his face after the incident of assisting in a witch’s prison break?”*

“There’s something I want to ask—as a subordinate assigned to this base. I’ve come ready to bow my head and even beg on the ground for it.”

“You think I’d speak to the likes of you?”

“We came at the request of Saint Disciple Risyā. If you won’t talk to me, then I’ll go through her.”

“.....” The Saint Disciple of the eighth seat went silent.

Iska’s remark was a bluff for the most part.

They hadn’t come at her request—but her command. And there was no way Iska had the power to ask Risyā to get an explanation from Nameless.

...If he asks her, he’ll find out immediately that this is all a lie...but I know he won’t, because all the Saint Disciples are on bad terms with one another.

Because they were all struggling against one another, trying to pull one over the other to raise up in rank. With them conniving to slit one another’s throats in their sleep, any offhand remark could result in someone snagging their rank. There was no way this man didn’t know that.

“You brat. You think you can negotiate with that?”

“I’m not going to ask you for the impossible. You’re a commanding officer, and I’m a subordinate. I’m not trying to overstep my bounds.”

“Overstep your bounds? Then, you should keep silent, junior,” he spat coldly. *“This tent is reserved for high-ranking officers. Which means, anything shared here is only for the ears of those people alone. This is not a place a traitor may enter at a moment’s notice.”*

“.....”

“No value to getting advice from a lesser soldier. You want your voice heard? Then, rise up in rank. If you get it, disappear from my sight.”

“Uh, um...about that!”

The curtains to the tent flung open, revealing a captain who looked tense, nervous, and as young as a little girl.

“Excuse me. I will speak in place of my subordinate as his captain. You’re fine

with that, right...?!” The captain puffed up her chest as though to assert the decorations on her uniform of captain rank. Her voice was strained. “Apologies if my subordinate was rude. There’s something I would like to tell you.”

“...Captain Mismis?!”

“Sorry for making you wait, Iska. I’ll take it from here.”

“Your legs are shaking.”

“It...it’s from excitement!” Her smile twitched up wryly as her small hand gripped into a hard fist, trying to get her nerves under control.

When Iska, her subordinate, saw that, she seemed incredibly delicate and vulnerable.

“This is my role. Let me show off a little for once.”

“.....”

“I’m no good on the battlefield, but I can fight for you within the scope of Imperial regulations.” With that, the captain pressed forward.

“...I-I’m Captain Mismis from Unit 907 of the Third Division!”

“How disappointing,” Nameless hacked out. *“First, the traitor. And now, two bratty children. Since when has the Empire become a playground?”*

“H-hey! I’m twenty-two! I may look this way, but I was in the same class as Risya! I’m about the same age as a Saint Disciple!”

“Risya?”

“Uh...” Mismis clammed up, realized that she’d reflexively revealed that name.

But that seemed to work as an advantage in the end.

“Risya? That woman. I can’t believe she calculated things to this extent.” The Saint Disciple of the eighth seat clucked his tongue. *“.....”*

“Though this may be forward, I have to tell you this!” With the silent officer before her, Mismis pointed to the whiteboard where the names of those in the three missing units had been scribbled.

“As a captain on this mission, I need to ask why you aren’t searching for the compromised units. B-because if you don’t find them and figure out how to stop it from happening again, what’s to prevent us from repeating this?!”

Gulp. Everyone in the room swallowed their breaths.

Mismis had posed the question that all had been thinking—and that all had lacked the courage to express out loud.

“There is no need to search for them.” Nameless slowly opened his mouth. *“I’ve had a lead on their disappearance from the start. I know the reason behind it, and I concluded it was meaningless to look for them.”*

“Huh?”

“...What did you say?” Iska doubted his ears as Mismis went bug-eyed next to him. “Um...are you suggesting that you’re not looking for the distressed units because you think they’re *dead...?!?*”

“Who knows. And if this is my speculation, it’s more than enough,” he asserted, aiming his sarcasm at the soldiers surrounding him—not at Iska.

“Actually, it’s comical that none of you has realized it. If you understand the state of affairs in this canyon, it’s easy enough to infer what’s happening.”

To infer. In other words, he didn’t have a special source for information, and yet, this man seemed confident in his own intuition.

“Could it involve a purebred from Nebulis?” Mismis asked.

Bingo. Iska had been thinking the same thing.

If there was anything that could overpower three Imperial units without resistance and without being a ferocious predator, it had to be a purebred from the Nebulis bloodline.

...We knew an unknown one would be coming to the canyon... It wouldn’t be impossible for her to have enough power to do something to the units without leaving any evidence behind.

Plus, what else would Nameless be referring to—if not the purebred? The Saint Disciple claimed he had guessed the reason. What had led him to solve the mystery that had befallen the missing units?

"How disappointing," he replied with a faint and long sigh, gazing down on them in scorn. Nameless shook his head. *"I finally understand why Risyra dispatched me. You all have the minds of amateurs. You can't see past their tricks."*

"...Wh-what does that mean?!"

"Trying to explain it to you would be a waste of time," he asserted, leaving no room for argument.

Then the assassin-turned-Saint-Disciple addressed everyone in the room. *"Devote yourselves to the vortex. Don't trouble your minds with anything else."*

3

The canyon was getting washed over with crimson as the rocky wastelands were coated in darkness by the curtain of night.

"Lights!" roared the supervising captain, and nightlights throughout the base were illuminated.

It was modest in number to prevent the Nebulis encampment from spotting them at night. The group was next to the tents in the base.

"He said to focus on just finding the vortex. How mean. Even after Iska went through all that." Captain Mismis let her shoulders droop as she perched on a chair. "I'm sorry I couldn't help... I tried to be brave..."

"No need to apologize. You did all you could, Captain." Opening the bag of rations, Iska shook his head. "I have newfound respect for you. You're the only one who said what no one else could."

It was way different from a captain making remarks to a supervising captain.

This was a Saint Disciple for crying out loud. They were under direct command of the Lord with the most rights in the Empire. They were allowed to execute people under their own discretion. That was why the supervising captains at headquarters held their tongues.

...Well, that was why I tried to go alone.

Nameless had come from the assassin's unit. No one knew what would bring his wrath down upon them. Iska hadn't thought the Saint Disciple would go as far as summarily executing him with a gun, but he had been prepared to receive a brutal beating.

"Nene and I tried to stop her. She didn't listen, though." Jhin lit the gas burner. "Regardless of the end result, you were brave out there... Though we were on standby wondering when you would be carried out of the tent."

"...Hee-hee-hee. Did I really do well?" She scratched her cheek in embarrassment.

"Yeah. You're usually a flustered twenty-two-year-old on the battlefield. In three years, you'll round up to thirty. For a captain nearing her thirties, you did great."

"You aren't praising me!"

"I am. I mean, Iska and I are on dinner duty to celebrate your efforts."

Whenever they were on a mission, they made dinner in shifts. Captain Mismis was up for duty, but as Jhin said, this was a special day. On top of that...

"Nene, how's the temperature?"

"Yup. It's perfect!"

They could hear shower water splashing. Nene was putting up the temporary one next to their tents.

"You get in first because you worked so hard, Captain. Go ahead!"

"I was waiting for this!" The captain leaped up from her chair.

Bathing was a necessary part of maintaining one's mental and physical stability.

When in an emergency, they could use only alcohol wipes to clean themselves. But whenever possible, the soldiers took a shower once every two days at the very least.

"A shower! A shower!" Mismis sprinted toward the temporary room, which was built for the use of one person at a time. It was a box made from plastic

walls, and the front had a curtain with a zipper.

“...Boys, don’t peek, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Stop blabbering, and just get in and get out.”

Captain Mismis entered the shower room. And soon enough, they could hear the spray of water hitting the ground from the thin curtain.

“Her showers are long. Let’s start eating dinner. Hey, Nene, what do you want?”

“I’ll have tomato risotto! What about you, Iska?”

“Then, I’ll have mushroom soup with pasta.”

They picked their favorites from the set of dinner rations.

They would boil water with the gas burner, pour the rations into a ready-made pouch, and bon appétit. They weren’t as good as anything from a restaurant, but Iska thought they were much better than trying to cook from scratch—which he wasn’t used to doing.

“How about you, Jhin?”

“I’ll have soybean and potato stew. It’s new from the Department of Innovations... Anyway, it’s gotten dark.” Jhin paused as he held his spoon in his hand.

The sky above their heads had started to get coated in an inky black. A moment ago, it had been burning crimson, but now they were under the black heavens, lit by the starlight. Because of the nightlights, they could barely manage to make out the tents. The outskirts of the base were practically in pitch-black shadow.

“Hey, Iska? We’re going to be looking for the vortex tomorrow in a different location, right?”

“Yeah, I think the headquarters for strategy are deciding the next place right now. There’s a base here and in another location, which means we’re probably coordinating with them.”

The captains in the headquarters were most certainly going to pull an all-nighter.

They would gather all the results from the search and report them to headquarters in the city to select new survey routes until sunrise.

“I wonder where we’ll be surveying?”

“It might be out in the boonies,” Jhin commented as he ate his rations. “Because to everyone else, it would seem our boss tried picking a fight with the Saint Disciple. I wouldn’t put it past him to have us poking around the back alley to nowhere, just to get on our nerves. Well, I wouldn’t mind.”

“...Yeah. We did get to see the captain be super cool, after all.” Even Iska hadn’t thought the captain would have jumped head-first into the situation, instead of scolding him for recklessly acting on his own. She had stood in the line of fire for him. “I knew she cared about us, but that made me really happy.”

“Don’t tell her. If she starts making mistakes because she’s on cloud nine, we’ll be in trouble.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t do that.” He smiled wryly at Jhin.

It was true that hearing such praise might’ve made her giddy, but she wouldn’t let it go to her head or let herself get carried away. It was Captain Mismis they were talking about, after all.

“Didn’t her dad retire as a low-ranking soldier?”

“He got injured in a battle with the astral corps, which was why he had to retire.”

Her father had regretted that he hadn’t been able to advance to captain. And Mismis had enlisted in her father’s place, vowing to become one, after spending her entire childhood watching her father grow forlorn. Compared to all the brawny men, she was a tiny captain with an overwhelming handicap when it came to her physical strength. But she managed to endure her inferiority complex, even with Risya next to her, and passed the captain’s exam.

“The captain had a harder time than most, so I always thought we’d be the ones supporting her, but...”

It seemed there hadn't been a need for that.

She had protected Iska against a Saint Disciple and had her say while facing the firing line. Their captain had done something that all the other captains in that base had feared.

"The captain is...small and cute, and I end up treating her like we're the same age, but she's really mature. We can count on her; She's a renable woman."

"Hmph."

"Huh?"

"Iska...I get it now."

They turned around. Nene held the rations in her hand, looking at him with upturned eyes and a big pout.

"Wh-what's with you, Nene?"

"Fine. Captain Mismis is an adult... She's shorter than I am, but she's fully developed in all the right places. She's got a big chest, too... Iska, that's what you're talking about, right?!"

"W-wait a sec, Nene!"

"So you're telling me you like mature women, Iska..."

"I think you're getting it all twisted!"

He'd just been talking about Captain Mismis's mental maturity—not physical development. Right as he was about to explain himself, the temporary shower curtain suddenly slid open behind him.

"Whew. What a great shower!" Captain Mismis's skin was slightly red, and she seemed content. She had just wrapped a small towel around her head.

With nothing but white steam curling her body, the captain's alluring figure was bare to the world.

...Uh... Uh, um. What's going on?

Beyond the faint steam, they could see her chest was as ripe as fruit, almost out of place on her childish figure. In contrast to her taut abdomen, the full curve of her hips displayed to them that Mismis wasn't a girl but a woman.

“Right, it’s time for some TV! ...And cold juice... Oh. Huh?”

Her eyes flung wide open. Fluttering her eyelids in surprise was the adult woman in question, who wasn’t even wearing underwear.



“...Hey.”

“...Um.”

“...Wow, Captain, I *knew* your boobs were big.”

Iska, Jhin, and Nene were right in front of her eyes. When the captain saw her three subordinates, each one of them wide-eyed, she finally realized something was amiss.

She wasn't in her own room in the barracks but at the battlefield.

“A-a-aaaaaaaaaaaaack?!” she shrieked pitifully, her scream echoing through the night and base. “Ah...ah, ahhhh.....?! N-no... I... Um, it was so nice being in the shower that I felt like I was back at home...”

“Calm down! Please calm down, Captain!”

“You're both perverts, Jhin and Iska!” she yelped, using both hands to cover her cleavage, which could not conceivably be hidden under her two palms. The buck naked captain leaped back into the shower room.

Or so they thought. She peeked her bright-red face from the gap in the curtain.

“Ugh... Now I'll never be able to get married. I'll hold you accountable for seeing me naked, Iska and Jhin! Make up for it for the rest of your lives!”

“How're we supposed to do that?!”

“Don't worry. We could barely make out anything, thanks to the steam. You were saved by a super-small margin.”

Fortunately, her subordinates were the only ones who had seen Mismis in this state. The other units were still eating or had headed back to their tents for the night. As Jhin said, the chances were low that word about this would spread among the Imperial army.

“...Ah. I worked so hard today... I guess I had my head in the clouds...”

“Which is why you felt so liberated?”

“...Yeah.” Beyond the curtain, the captain sighed. “Iska, prep the barbecue meal in our rations—three people's worth, please.”

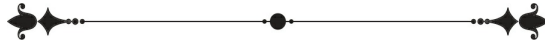
“Are you stress eating?”

“I need to eat up for tomorrow.”

“...Got it. Captain, make sure you put on your clothes before you come out this time,” he replied toward the shower room.

Iska set about preparing the captain’s dinner.

CHAPTER 4



A Jackpot Between Life and Death

1

The morning sun graced the canyon.

There was an enormous waterfall in the distance, roaring down to a river that flowed into the canyon. The sight could be described as nothing short of magnificent.

A vehicle was stopped on the cliff that overlooked the river in the valley.

“Nene, what did you say?!” Captain Mismis asked the ponytailed girl in the driver’s seat. “They’re picking up astral activity from within the base? That couldn’t mean...”

“They said the squad in charge of analysis is checking it out. We can’t know until we investigate the wavelengths, but it might be residue from a mage using astral power rather than the vortex.” Nene slid the device back in the holder at her hip.

They had just left the base an hour ago, arriving to the area that they’d been appointed to search for the vortex on their second day there. And on that very morning, they had suddenly gotten an emergency message from headquarters.

“If it’s the astral corps, they might have tailed an unobservant squad sometime yesterday and gotten word of our base’s location,” Jhin speculated from the back seat. “Iska, do you remember seeing any suspicious activity?”

“No. I didn’t feel like we were being followed, and I was using the binoculars to look around the whole time. It wasn’t us. I think a unit from another area must have been stalked.” From the back of the jeep, Iska leaned out and looked

behind the vehicle.

The top of the cliff had a gorgeous view. He felt like they would have been able to see at a glance the Nebulis corps hiding. Plus, he didn't sense they were being tracked down.

"Nene, did we get any instructions? Do they want us to go back like yesterday?"

"No, they didn't say that."

"Meaning they want us to search for the vortex. Out of all things, the enemy has found our base. What is Nameless even thinking...?"

At the strategy base the night before, the mysterious Saint Disciple barely seemed to care that they had lost communication with three units. He hadn't even prepared a search unit to look for them.

Nothing had deviated from the plan, according to him.

He had a guess as to why the units had vanished. That was why the Saint Disciple had said there wasn't a single problem.

"But if we've found astral activity in the base, that means it's as good as settled that the Nebulis corps has dispatched its soldiers." Jhin's hand stretched out toward his sniper rifle.

The night before, he had disengaged the safety so that he could go into battle at any moment.

"The three missing units—that's thirteen people in total, isn't it? I'm betting that was all their doing. I've got no idea if it's the handiwork of the astral corps or the purebred, though."

"Nene, bring out the car. And Captain—" Iska pulled the pair of astral swords into his left hand.

When the young captain turned to him, he pointed ahead of the car. "Captain Mismis, watch the front. Jhin and I will look out the back. We don't know who's out there. We have to assume there's a chance the astral mages might attack us at any moment."

"...R-right!" The captain gripped a gun in her small hands, tensing up her face.

Taking a glance at her profile, Iska intently held his tongue.

...Nameless. You seem to know what's going on...but won't things get worse if you don't do something about it now?

2

The northeastern region of Mudor Canyon.

The roaring waterfall below them let out a spray of mist, which expanded into fog. A monstrous bird with bright-red wings soared through the crimson canyon.

It was a vermilion bird, a rare species that took fifty years to reach maturity with an average life span of three hundred years. Because it was in their nature to loathe noise, they had disappeared from the Imperial territories altogether.

“Look, Lady Alice. Look at that splendid spray.” On the back of the gigantic vermilion bird, the attendant pointed below them.

“The Undine Falls, said to be the largest waterfall in the world. It’s etched out the mountains to carve out the valley, and it is even said that it molded this entire canyon.”

“.....Yes. Right...r-right.”

“Coursing through it every single day for thousands of years to bring about this change—almost as though it were the planet’s own work of art. But five hundred years ago, large-scale Imperial weapons set aflame this canyon, which burned for three days and three nights and— Lady Alice?”

“.....” Instead of answering, Alice grabbed Rin’s shoulders with both her hands. Next to her and unable to speak, her attendant had a hardened expression, shaking her head with her last ounce of strength.

No. No way, she seemed to say.

“Lady Alice, please don’t be scared. Would you please sit more gracefully?”

“...gh! ...g.”

“I thought you’d overcome your fear of heights? We went by air to the Nelka

forest... Oh, I guess that time we flew at low altitudes.”

Mm-hmm. Alice nodded several times.

But this time, they were soaring over a mountain range, which meant the vermilion bird had to fly as high as the clouds. The people on the ground obviously registered as nothing but dots at their height, but even the tanks were nothing but pinpricks.

The point was that Alice, with her phobia of heights, did not feel they would survive.

“Ah, the wind.”

“——k?!”

A gust pelted them from the side, and Alice felt like she was about to fall right off the bird’s back, and she let out a voiceless scream.

“We’re fine, Lady Alice. You’re only afraid because you believe it’s something to fear.”

“...That... That’s nonsense, and you know it.”

“I could even stand up. How about I balance on one foot?”

“Noooooooo! You can’t, Rin! Please don’t move!” She was at her limit. Alice screamed and hugged Rin. “You can’t let go of my hand! And that’s an order!”

“Wh-where do you think you’re touching, Lady Alice?! Please don’t stick your hand up my skirt!”

“Th-then, I’ll go up...!”

“That’s my chest!”

“I’m desperate for anything! Oh, but I guess there’s not much to hold on to here, Rin.”

“...I’m...going to let go of your hand.”

“W-wait a second, Rin! That was a joke. Please! Don’t let goooooo!” Alice clung to her attendant’s ankle, straining her voice.

Half an hour later, Rin patted the sleeping bird’s head after it had tired itself

out. In front of her, Alice was heaving ragged breaths as the ground seemed to spin.

“...I feel like I’ve screamed enough to last me a lifetime.”

“You say that every time we fly for a campaign, don’t you?”

“It’s terrible. Why do I have to be terrorized...?”

“Because—” Rin pointed at a rocky tract in front of her.

They were in a shadowy area towered over by a cliff, where dome-shaped tents stood in lines, made to mimic the rocks of the canyon. It was the campgrounds of the astral corps.

“Weren’t you the one who said you wanted to come here, Lady Alice?”

“Reluctantly. Blame the House of Zoa! I wouldn’t have come if they weren’t scheming to monopolize the vortex.”

“*Shhh*. Lady Alice, they’ll hear you.” Rin raised a finger to her mouth.

...Right. I guess it was careless to frame it that way...because these troops work under the House of Zoa, even though we’re all part of the same people.

They were trying to have sole rights to the vortex.

There wasn’t a lack of mages who would participate in this scheme in hopes of receiving stronger astral energy. Which meant all the members had consented to the schemes of the Zoa, at the bare minimum.

“Though I don’t think they’ll mistreat you for coming, Lady Alice.”

“Of course not.”

She was the secret weapon of the current queen.

Meaning no one would directly defy Alice, who was known far and wide within the Nebulis Sovereignty.

With Rin in tow, Alice headed toward the dim camp, and when the guards saw her, they raised fearful voices from their hiding places in the shadows of the cliff.

“...Lady Aliceliese?!”

“What’s brought you here?!”

“I was in the area for business. I’m weary of riding the vermilion bird. I would like to seek respite here and take the opportunity to greet everyone.” Alice had prepared this answer with Rin beforehand.

To cover their bases in case anyone looked for proof, they’d actually gone out of their way to a neutral city near the canyon and done some official business there.

“How are things coming along? Has the Empire made any advances?”

“There have been no issues.”

“As you can see, this is a desolate canyon far from Imperial territory. There are no important resources here. The Empire sees no merit in having their soldiers make a move here.”

No important resources? Is that really true? Alice kept that in her mind and exchanged a look with Rin, who was beside her.

“I’m tired as well. We would like to rest inside the base.”

“Y-you mean right now...?”

“W-we’ll need to check in with the captain first...”

“Who do you think she is?” Rin raised her voice, loud enough so the astral corps could hear. They had gathered upon noticing the two satellite guards engaging with Alice and Rin. “Are you planning to make Princess Aliceliese wait in this windy place? We are your kin—astral mages! There should be nothing for you to hide.”

The place was silent. In that pause, Alice progressed into the base, speed-walking through the camp. She ignored the headquarters for construction, going deeper and deeper.

...I need proof that they’re looking for the vortex... They can’t make excuses if I find a giant surveying machine, right?

It had to be in a large container. It was doubtful it would be in a tent. She was sure it would be set up and exposed to the elements within the base somewhere.

“Rin, what about that?” Alice’s gaze fell beyond the headquarters.

A heavy barricade had been built in a circle with a large camouflage tarp covering the inside.

“I wonder if it’s an astral energy finder. Is the sheet there to keep the Empire from scouting it from above?”

“No, they wouldn’t be able to find it from the bottom of this canyon even if they looked at it from the mountain above. And if they turned on the machine with a tarp over it, it would break for sure.”

“...Seems suspicious.” Alice’s feet turned toward the barricade.

The astral mages who realized that changed their tune and stood in her way.

“Please wait, Lady Aliceliese!”

“This is a weapon to fight the Empire that’s still in the experimental stage. There’s a chance that it could go off, and we’ll be doing a disservice to the queen if you were to get hurt.”

She was in front of the locked entrance of the barricade. The two standing in her way were captains from the astral corps.

“Please move. I am a successor with a right to the throne. What are you trying to hide from someone who may one day become queen?”

“...No. We cannot.”

“We cannot let you go in here.”

Though they felt threatened by Alice’s gaze, these veteran mages had the pluck not to give in. But their firm position rubbed her the wrong way.

...I see... You’re siding with the Zoa, too, huh.

They were traitors of the current queen, her mother.

“I’ll tell you this right now. *I’m angered* by the thing that you’re hiding.”

“...gh!” The duo turned pale, confronted by the intensity of her wrath.

She was a purebred who was counted as the strongest in the Sovereignty. If she really became upset, she had the power to encase the whole canyon

indiscriminately in ice.

“I have no intention of injuring you, but I’m willing to use as much power as I need without harming you.”

She could freeze their legs or their arms. Alice’s specialty was gentle violence that wouldn’t result in harm.

“I will wait five seconds. Move.”

But Alice knew these men wouldn’t back down. They’d already prepared themselves for her punishment. Their determined gazes were clearly communicating that to her.

“That’s five seconds... I see. You asked for it.” Alice took a step forward.

The two mages clenched their eyes in fear.

Light blasted out from the other side of the barricade.

The tarp covering it shot off high into the air, and the fluorescent green lights spewed outward in tiny motes—a spray that even made its way outside the barricade.

“It’s the vortex! There’s no mistaking it, Lady Alice!” Rin yelled in excitement.

The exposed ground had caved in like a volcanic crater, and the bottom was significantly cracked. The astral light had overflowed from that rift.

—An ephemeral light. An almost illusory effect that sunlight lacks.

But it seemed that most of the torrent was still inside the earth, and this explosion had set off only small lumps of floating energy.

“But the color of this light...” Alice looked up at the glow that disappeared into the air. “...Oh well. We were both wrong, Rin.”

“Yes, we’ll need to analyze its type. It doesn’t seem to be ice, like you, or earth, like me. We should check whether it’s compatible with anyone in the royal family.”

Astral power would strengthen when exposed to a vortex. But this power branched out into several types. If their element was not a match for the vortex, it would do nothing.

...I guess the chances of an exact match are one in several dozen—at most... If it was ice, it would have been blue light, and if it was earth, brown. This is a vibrant green.

Alice would guess wind, but it couldn't be accurately identified until the light from the vortex intensified.

"Come to think of it, it's definitely clear. With this, the House of Zoa is—" Rin was about to speak, but when she heard the footsteps behind them, she whipped around to see... "...Lord Mask?"

"Hey there. I thought I heard a commotion outside. I knew it was you."

It was the man in the mask wrapped in black clothes. He sauntered forward, tailed by a dozen astral soldiers.

...How annoying... To think he greeted us at the palace and immediately dashed ahead of us here.

They faced each other, a yard away.

"I'm amazed by your tomboyishness, Alice and Rin," he said from behind the mask. The voice spilling out seemed to contain a wry smile. "When your mother was around your age, I remember her being a bit more ladylike."

"I have no intention of getting in your way. However—"

The ground started to tremble where it had caved in, and from it, astral radiance seeped out. He could no longer deceive them.

"You know what I am trying to say, don't you?"

"You've misunderstood." The purebred man shrugged. "We only just confirmed four hours ago that this was a vortex. If we were about to report back to the Sovereignty right now, there wouldn't be any issues, right?"

"....."

"Well, not that I think the House of Lou would be able to effectively use this vortex." He was obviously provoking them, expressing the true feelings of the House of Zoa.

...The queen has been acting cautiously about engaging in an all-out battle

with the Empire... And that's where the House of Zoa has a bone to pick with her.

If the Zoa could determine that the vortex could strengthen their energy, they would certainly try and start a full-blown war. This was what motivated them to push one of their own onto the throne for the next queen.

"...I see you're hoping to initiate a full-scale battle upon strengthening your mages at the vortex."

"Of course." There wasn't any hesitation in his nod. "After all, this is what the mages have pined for for over a hundred years... Oh, perfect timing. Come here, Kissing."

The line of astral soldiers parted. Between the cleft, a girl with black hair, dressed up as though a doll and short enough to reach Alice's shoulders, strolled over to them.

She seemed unsteady on her feet, staggering forward with her hands in front of her as though fumbling in the dark.

Which made sense. This young girl named Kissing could see nothing, because she had a firm blindfold wrapped over her eyes.

...I can't believe she's still wearing that blindfold... Just like she was years ago.

Alice didn't know why, other than an uncanny explanation that it would be *dangerous for her not to wear it.*

"Hey, Kissing. It's our relative Alice. You met her four years ago."

"__"

"You don't remember her? I see. Oh well. You were young, after all. And Alice has become a charming young woman in the last few years. You wouldn't be able to recognize her." Lord Mask stroked her head as she clung to him. "You know what I'm trying to say. Trust us with protecting the vortex."

"Are you saying she can guard it by herself?"

Just two days prior, Lord Mask had been bragging about the House of Zoa, babbling on and on about the strength of the purebred Kissing. But Alice hadn't seen it for herself.

“I have no desire to doubt the skills of your house’s beloved child. But the Empire will kick things up a notch if they find the location of this vortex.”

Rin had two bags over her shoulder—and their contents were none other than several days’ worth of supplies for Alice and Rin.

“We came all this way. Let Rin and me join you in protecting the most important resource for our country. We can theorize all we want about how we’d use it, but if we can’t guard it, none of it will matter.”

“Right. That’s why this child is here.” He had been patting Kissing’s head throughout their conversation. “The Imperial camp is already in chaos. Our only remaining threat is the Saint Disciple. Kissing will be more than enough.”

“...In chaos?”

“We have prisoners. *We’ve already captured three.* They’ve been restrained in a tent in the back. Would you like to see?”

“You mean Imperial units?” This came as a shock to Alice.

In the canyon, the visibility was *too* good, and the valley amplified any sounds. If even a single gunshot went off as they tried to restrain the Imperial forces, the other units were bound to notice.

Then, what methods had they used to capture the three units?

“Is that her strength?”

“All part of our strategy. We get detailed reports on the movements of the Imperial forces. And we had no difficulty capturing them.”

“...Which means you have spies?” Alice chewed on her bottom lip to an extent that no one would notice.

They would outwit their opponent. Trick them. Assassinate them. Imprison them. All of it could be justified in the name of strategy.

...It’s just more of the same... How many times will we repeat this? Is this the only way to settle things?

She could not deny that it was an excellent plan.

But is this the best path to take for someone who will unify this country one

day?

“...I’m sorry. Where can we rest?”

“Hmm. Right. Let us prepare a place for you. Captain, take the bags from Rin.”

His subordinates acted almost like gentlemen as they made the arrangements.

Alice watched their backs in silence.

“Rin.”

“Yes.”

“Where is my worthy match of an opponent?”

Alice let her shoulders droop as she remained glued to her spot, unmoving.

3

They had finished searching the first area for the vortex, gearing up to move to their next location. As Iska climbed into the car, the communications device on top of Mismis’s thighs started to go off.

“Huh. From headquarters? Iska, could you hold on to my gauge?”

“And from the captains’ channel... Must be important news.”

Iska was on the edge of his seat to know more about it, but he decided to leave it to the captain, scanning for the vortex with his binoculars—or that’s what he’d planned to do.

“This is Mismis of Unit 907. Mm...hmm... *What?! Why would that...? WHAT?! U-understood!*”

There was no way he could look the other way when a conversation this laden with meaning was taking place before his very eyes.

“Ah, geez. First we have an emergency notification and then an emergency order. We just can’t get a break.”

The call cut off. Captain Mismis slumped back into her seat.

“That was a quick call. What is it this time?”

“...More to follow the events of this morning.” She pulled together her sentence with a sigh. “Remember that message Nene got? That they detected astral activity in the base? It seems it’s an astral power of the corps, and the location of our base was no secret to them, apparently.”

“And our countermeasures?”

“We’re relocating the base. The officers are moving the headquarters of strategy and important machines into tanks, straight over to the second base. But we’re leaving the tents behind. We want them to think that our army is still there, so the plan is to not remove everything.”

“They really screwed the pooch on this one.”

He could understand why the captain had been surprised mid-conversation. Headquarters hadn’t issued any concrete plans before this, and they had just changed course.

“Do you think that was Nameless’s proposal?”

“You know what, Iska...” She lowered her voice. “Between just you and me, Nameless isn’t at headquarters right now. This is classified information for the captains, but he left to act independently.”

“What?”

“That proposal just now was a joint decision by all the supervising captains left at headquarters. Though, of course, I think the communications units have communicated that to Nameless.”

“...No wonder.” Iska tried to keep his wry smile at bay.

With the Saint Disciple absent from the base, headquarters could finally perform their capabilities to the fullest.

“So we’re going to continue searching for the vortex?”

“Yeah. Headquarters is in the process of transferring to the second base, but they said they would finish before we need to get back. Did you hear me, Jhin? Nene?”

“Yup, yup!”

“With you yapping so loudly, I can hear you whether I want to or not.”

The sniper and mechanic were outside the armored car. Jhin was observing their surroundings through a pair of binoculars, and Nene had the gauge hanging off her neck as she checked for astral energy.

“Jhin, how are things going? If you see anything strange, let me know.”

“As if it’d be that easy. Like, oh no, astral energy is just *flooding* out of the ground in front of us. All I’ve found are nests and burrows at the bottom of the canyon. And at the top of the cliffs, I’ve found vegetation.” *And no end to the boredom*, he almost seemed to say. Jhin shrugged. “Looks like the needle on Nene’s gauge has started to go haywire. I’m sure the vortex is near here somewhere.”

“Hey, Jhin. What’s that white flower called?” Nene asked.

“It’s a lily of the valley. A perennial flower that gives off a strong smell. It might look all cute, but its roots are poisonous and if you eat one, your stomach will—”

“Will you two stop fooling around?!” Mismis put a hand to her hip and scowled.

“Then, point us in the right direction, boss.”

“Huh?”

“We’ve finished searching this whole area. Where should we look next?”

“R-right. Ummm...” In the passenger’s seat, Captain Mismis pointed to the bottom of a canyon a distance away. “There! Let’s go to the bottom for a bit. Seems we could get down on that slope with the car, too.”

“The depths of the canyon? There you go, choosing the dangerous option again.”

“It’s not scary if we’re all together. Okay, Jhin, make sure you protect your captain as we go to find the vortex and—”

In the canyon bottom where Captain Mismis pointed...

...a green light heaved for a moment.

“.....Huh?”

It shot up like fireworks. Mismis herself watched it with bug eyes as faint particles of light melted softly into the air and disappeared.

At the same time, the gauge that hung from Nene’s neck leaped with a terrific force.

“The astral light is putting out over two thousand lunas! Captain, you’re amazing. This has got to be astral energy!”

“Whaaaat?! R-really?” The captain stared incredulously at her own finger. “My hand. Maybe I’m ridiculously blessed. Hey, Iska, you want me to touch you? You want me to? See, here.”

“I’m fine, Captain. If you were, I think we wouldn’t have gone in the red at the casino... Whoops, got off track there. We need to hurry and tell headquarters.”

Would they go near the vortex to observe it?

Would they wait there for reinforcements?

Either way, they would be switching tactics to protecting it with all they had. They would wait for orders from headquarters.

“Hey, Jhin, we’re the first to find it, right? I wonder if headquarters will recognize us for that. Maybe they’ll give us Captain Mismis’s favorite thing—a monetary reward.”

“After everything is done. We’ll either protect the vortex or destroy it. Headquarters will probably need to get in contact with the Imperial capital to make that decision.....or something. I’m not sure if things will go that smoothly.” Jhin looked toward the canyon bottom as he threw his sniper rifle into the seat. “Too bad, boss. Looks like we weren’t the first people to find it.”

“...What? Isn’t that car from Noro’s party?!”

They were on the slope that connected to the bottom of the canyon, where an Imperial military car was kicking up a cloud of dust as it raced along. The driver’s seat was occupied by Mismis’s friend Captain Shanorotte. She was accompanied by three of her subordinates—two women and one man.

“They probably already reported it a while ago, finishing their thorough observation of the vortex. We got to it after them.”

“Ah. Ugh, Noro. We thought we were first!”

The military car screeched to a stop before their eyes. The door flung open. When the tall captain emerged from the car, Captain Mismis clung to her.

“You’re stupid, Noro!”

“Oh my. What’s wrong, Mismis?”

“The vortex...”

“Oh, that. We saw you from the bottom; that’s why we came here in a hurry. You figured out it was the vortex?”

“Of course we did!” Captain Mismis pointed down. “Because it just lit up all of a sudden. Nene’s gauge started to react. You saw the real deal, right, Noro?”

“Yes. It was pretty. But not as big as I was hoping.” Captain Shanorotte cocked her head to the side quizzically. “Mismis. Did you see anything else down there?”

“Huh?”

“...Which means you were making a big commotion about the vortex, huh. We came here in a hurry.” She gently patted Captain Mismis’s head. “Aw, you’re so clueless.”

“...What?”

Captain Shanorotte pointed ahead at the cliff, following Mismis’s lead.

The light from the astral energy had died down. With his comrades, Iska squinted into the darkness, unable to see anything beyond its dark shadow.

“Unlike the Empire, which fears astral energy, the Nebulis Sovereignty has taken it in. That’s why they’ve gotten much further with their research, including how to pinpoint the location of a vortex.”

“Noro?”

“Before you found it, Mismis, the Sovereignty had already set up camp in the valley to capture the units that got too close. Exactly like now.” Captain

Shanorotte squeezed Mismis, hard.

“Th-that hurts, Noro...”

“Oh, does it? Sorry. You’re just so tiny, Mismis.”

Considering the difference between their builds and physical strength, the embrace felt more like a vise grip than a hug to Mismis’s childish figure.

And the other captain didn’t seem to intend to loosen her arms.

“Noro?”

“Oh, well.” Shanorotte eventually loosened her grip, lowering her eyes to meet the gaze of her friend. They were *not* smiling.

When Iska felt that unease, he tried to say something, but it happened before he could.

“Out of everyone in the Empire, Mismis, you were one of my favorites. I was planning to leave you until the very end so I could spend the most time with you. I was hoping I’d be able to have my fun, torturing, torturing, and torturing you.” She touched the base of her own neck.

Riiiiip. Shanorotte yanked off something flesh-toned affixed to her neck.

“...Huh?”

“Does this surprise you?” A sticker was stuck to the tips of her fingers, used to conceal a pea-green astral crest at the base of the blond captain’s neck.

“Y-you’re a witch?! O-ow!”

“That’s right. I’m what you call a witch. As are all my subordinates.” The captain grabbed Mismis’s neck, strangling her.

No, she wasn’t a captain but a mage under the guise of an officer. The woman had shown her true colors with the unmistakable expression of a ruthless witch loathed and feared by the Empire.

“Captain?!”

“Don’t you dare move, Imperial soldier!” In that moment, Shanorotte’s astral crest flickered.

Zwing. The sound of the air burning. A bolt of light flashed past Iska's, Jhin's, and Nene's gazes.

"The astral power of lightning?!"

...She's able to invoke her attacks quickly... Oh, geez. A stubborn form of astral power—out of all things!

It didn't have much range, unlike flame types, but it could be invoked with terrifying speed—attack as fast as a bolt. Even Iska was getting anxious as to whether he could sever these attacks. There was more than enough power in the lightning to take down an entire person. In close combat, it was one of the most menacing types of energy.

"Noro... Where's the...real Noro?"

"The 'real' Noro? Ha-ha-ha. I can't believe it. You *still* haven't figured it out? You're an actual idiot. But that's what I like about you. You're just so helplessly oblivious." She continued to strangle Mismis with one hand.

With the other, the witch triumphantly pointed at her own astral crest. "Shanorotte Gregory was born and raised in the Nebulis Sovereignty. Oh, but I've been in the Empire since I was fifteen. I've been the one and only Shanorotte since you and I met."

"...h!"

"Don't look at me like that. I won't give you any sympathy. You're an enemy—a foe. All those times you Imperial scum have called us 'witches'! All that time I had to hide my astral crest! You could never understand how I feel!"

She had trained as an Imperial soldier and gotten to captain rank. How many state secrets could she have leaked to the Nebulis Sovereignty over the past decade?

"So, Mismis...?"

She seemed almost like a different person—no, she'd probably been pretending to adopt that other persona this whole time.

As the witch looked down upon the captain, her gaze suddenly turned to a look of disgust—a far cry from how she'd stared at Mismis at the base.

“N-no... Sto...”

“I’ve decided on my prey for today!”

A surge of lightning flashed out from her astral crest, as if a living thread, and willowy bolts wrapped around the witch’s arm, snaking themselves around Mismis’s entire body as she was held by the neck.

“—gh.....” Zzzt. Her slender frame jerked once.

She stopped moving as though a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“*Why, you!*”

“I told you not to move.” Shanorotte pushed the muzzle of a gun into Mismis’s cheek. “Don’t forget. These three subordinates and I have been Imperial soldiers for over ten years. Which means we’re familiar with the ways the Empire treats prisoners of war.”

All three of her subordinates had guns pointed at Jhin, Nene, and Iska.

“Throw down your weapons and surrender. This little idiot is a captain, so we’ll take her prisoner. You’re junior soldiers, which means we’ll either execute or enslave you. But if you don’t pull any funny moves here, we might spare your lives. Oh, but of course, we’ll need to interrogate you first.”

“.....”

“Don’t do it, Iska. They aren’t just astral corps. They’re Imperial soldiers with more experience than us.”

They heard a dull *thud*.

Jhin had thrown down his readied sniper rifle to the ground. He sighed.

“Okay, I will, too. There.” Nene threw her gun and holster to the ground.

“...Fine. I’ll do it, too.” Iska lowered both astral swords to the ground.

“Oh wow. Worlds different from Mismis. You three get it. In that case... Right, you’re Imperial soldiers, which means you’re carrying handcuffs to take prisoners, right? Okay, you, over there. Nene, right? Go and put your handcuffs on your friends.”

“...Nice kink.”

“This is the Imperial way of doing things. You wouldn’t want to get attacked while getting close enough to put handcuffs on someone, right?” The witch narrowed her eyes, as though she found Jhin’s sarcasm pleasant.

“Nene, you got that, right?” None of the four Nebulis assassins had noticed the sniper with silver hair whispering.

Iska had barely managed to catch it because he’d been expecting it.

Next to Jhin, Nene blinked twice in place of nodding. That was their way of communicating “understood” when they were unable to say anything.

The mechanic had a hidden weapon—a ring mechanism that she wore on her finger.

“Satellite, the Star of Tetrabiblos, launch the anti–astral power grenade.”

It was a satellite that synchronized with Nene’s location.

An extraordinary mechanic, Nene Alkastone had been entrusted with an experimental anti–astral power weapon from the Department of Suppression Weapons Development. It would fire grenades from the sky and rob opponents of their vision with intense lights.

In addition, it would emit wavelengths that would throw off astral power.

...They won’t be able to use their attacks for a few seconds.

...I just need to aim for two out of the four people. I’ll disarm them, and if I can knock them out, we can turn the tables.

They had four opponents and only three people on their side. If he could defeat two, he could reverse the situation. After that, it was all about the timing. Nene tried to bide her time, looking for an opportunity to send commands for the bombardment through her ring.

“Come on. Hurry up. After you put handcuffs on those two, put them on yourself. Simple, right?”

“...Yes.” Nene had pulled out her handcuffs, turning her back on Shanorotte and the three subordinates.

This is it! Nene put her hand on her ring. Jhin and Iska kicked at the ground.

At the same moment...

“—You’re in the way.”

They heard the voice, felt his presence and the wind—but they couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Unit 104 of the Fifth Division. I’ll punish you here.”

The screams from the mages echoed.

Their arms were sliced off their bodies with the barrels of their handguns still in their grips. They withdrew without having a real understanding of what happened, and blood spurted from the shoulders and abdomens of two soldiers.

It was an invisible blade, capable of slicing through steel guns as smoothly as paper—sharp to a terrifying degree.

Ironically, the four were clad in their Imperial battle uniforms, which meant the protective textiles had probably saved them from being cut right through.

“...It couldn’t be?!” A mage yelped as blood poured from her left arm, pointing it toward the air as the astral crest glowed. “Namele—.....”

Before she could finish, that arm twisted with a dull sound, and the last of them lost consciousness and lay facedown on the ground.

“You filthy witches, intermingling with the Empire. Didn’t I tell you not to get in my way?”

“...Nameless.”

“To kidnap three Imperial units? There are only a handful of ways to accomplish that. You thought I wouldn’t notice traitors in our midst?”

The air quivered, shimmering as if a heat wave was right in front of Iska’s eyes. The form of one man appeared from it.

It was the Saint Disciple Nameless, his body wrapped in active camouflage.

“...Ah, I see. Come to think of it, they said you were acting alone this morning. So you were putting up a trap from the start. Little Lord Saint Disciple was originally from the assassin’s unit, after all.” Shanorotte backed away. “But it

would be so inconvenient if I was to get captured here, too.”

“I said I would punish you.” The Saint Disciple stepped toward her.

He seemed to glide over the ground as he headed toward Shanorotte’s chest. He did not hesitate to reach his arm out as though to crush her windpipe.

But Nameless was the one to immediately stop in his tracks.

There was a pillar of flames.

A sorcerer facedown on the ground had used an astral attack that had summoned a raging fire that stood in the way of Nameless.

“...We’ve gotten our hands on...the vortex... This is...our victory.....Empire—”

“Shut up.” The Saint Disciple punted him with his foot, and the man went silent.

With its summoner lost, the pillar of fire disappeared, but by that time, Shanorotte had already run into the Imperial car, carrying Mismis.

He turned to that defenseless back.

“—”

He had a glass knife.

Nameless did not hesitate to throw it.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

They heard a loud explosion when the tip of Iska’s astral sword shattered the transparent knife into pieces in midair.

“...What do you think you’re doing?”

He was unable to reply to the Saint Disciple.

Iska yelled at the sniper, who had readied his rifle. “Jhin!”

“Doing it now!” He aimed the scope at the armored Imperial car.

The shot was soundless, launching and sticking into the tire of the armored car that Shanorotte rode in.

“All done. We can figure out her specific location with this.”

The Imperial car drove away. It went at full throttle toward the vortex at the bottom of the canyon—likely because the hideout for the astral corps was there.

On the side of Shanorotte were Mismis and the three units captured from the day before. And at Iska's feet were the three mages who'd disguised themselves as Imperial soldiers. It seemed that each side had gotten its own set of prisoners.

"You brat." The Saint Disciple took his eyes off the armored car that disappeared below the cliff. *"Are you deranged? You interfered with my knife."*

"...I think you must know, but..." Iska faced Nameless over shards of glass scattered on the ground.

If he hadn't stopped it, that knife would have mercilessly pierced right through the witch and *into Mismis*. Iska had realized that and barely stopped it in time.

...All you care about is capturing the witch.

...You couldn't even be bothered to consider Captain Mismis's life.

"Those lightning types are statistically rare. If we captured her, she would have made a great sample."

"If that's all you have to say, my opinion still stands... You've got to be kidding me."

"That is clear insubordination toward your commanding officer. If you wish to go back to prison—"

"Mr. Saint Disciple," the sniper interrupted them. "There's something more important that we need to discuss. We know the whereabouts of the three Imperial units and our own captain. How should we get them back?"

"—" The Saint Disciple turned around. *"You want a strategy meeting? What are you saying?"*

"...What?"

"No change in strategy. Do as I command."

One. Secure the vortex before the Sovereignty.

Two. If that fails, destroy the vortex before it can be used.

He can't mean...

Iska's mind flashed with images of the short-range ballistic missiles they had carried to the edge of the base. Then his next thought was that the vortex was already in the Nebulis Sovereignty's hands.

"We will bomb the vortex. And that'll be the end of it."

If they couldn't have it, they would destroy it.

That included the hideout for the astral corps. That included the Imperial units taken as prisoners. That included Captain Mismis.

It would all be pulverized without a trace by the missiles. That was what this Saint Disciple was suggesting.

"And your response?"

"...You've got to be joking. I don't feel like replying," Iska practically spat out.

Jhin and Nene just watched in silence.

"We need to destroy the vortex before they can use it." The Saint Disciple turned his back to them. His body, covered by the photochemical suit, turned faint, as though melting into the light.

"I will be promptly returning to the base and will make the official announcement to the headquarters of strategy that we will commence the bombing... It's no use. And that includes everything."

He disappeared—presence, body, and voice. The Saint Disciple would probably never address them again.

They were left behind in that place.

"I wonder if we'll make it." Nene looked at the ring on her pinkie finger. "That Saint Disciple has got to report to the Imperial capital first. It'll take thirty minutes to write it up and communicate it. It'll take an hour before Imperial headquarters gives a confirmation to discharge the weapons. They'll need to call the missile engineers and calculate the trajectory. But I'm sure they'll

launch the missiles sometime today.”

“...No extensions, huh?”

Nene bent her fingers as she counted. Iska nodded.

Once the sun set, they wouldn't be able to do anything. They could do nothing but attack in the time span of the few hours left.

“So then, what'll we do? They'll definitely be expecting us to come to get our captain. If we just rush in there, they'll counterattack,” Jhin muttered in a low voice. “If anything, there's a high chance that the purebreds have probably come with the astral corps. Even if we were to challenge them, we'd probably just get ganged up on.”

He pulled out a small device with a liquid crystal display. The light that moved as it blinked on and off was the signal from the enemy vehicle that Captain Mismis was riding on.

“What should we do, Iska? Even if we know the captain's location, it'll be nearly impossible to get her back.”

“...Let's return to base first. We need to check what's going on there.” Iska took the initiative and got into the seat of the armored vehicle. “We need to prepare. And before anything else, we gotta find out when the missiles are going to be launched.”

“If we're off by a minute or even a second, we'll end up in the blast.” Jhin slipped into the car. “I mean, based on our losing streak at the casino, I can tell we've all got shitty luck. Everything comes down to whether we can make a one-eighty or not.”

“Iska, are you sure we can do this?” Nene climbed into the driver's seat.

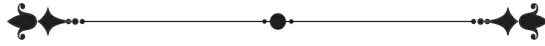
He turned to the ponytailed girl as she floored the gas pedal.

“I am.” Iska didn't hesitate to reply. “I'm sure we'll hit the jackpot.”

This wasn't a game with roulette, cards, or coins—this was a gamble of life and death.

They would get that jackpot, even if it meant dragging it out by force.

CHAPTER 5



Kissing, the Purebred of Thorns

1

In the middle of Mudor Canyon, toward the northeast.

They were at the Mother Point—a majestic rocky mountain where one could get an almost complete view of the vast canyon. They watched as the sun set over the horizon.

“Iska, how do things look?”

It was five in the afternoon.

From behind, Jhin had asked Iska, who was checking out the distance with a high-magnification scope.

“I saw the vortex erupt once. Seems like it’s settled down. What about you?”

“No movements. The location of the transmitter overlaps the vortex. Their hideout is over there, and the captured Imperial soldiers are gathered there in all likelihood.”

“Iska, Jhin.” Opening the door, Nene beckoned them over.

She was in an armored Imperial car, but this one wasn’t a convertible but a camouflaged vehicle that blended into the rock surface of the canyon.

“We have two hours till the missile bombing.”

“...Let’s go.” Iska stood up from his stooped position.

The camp of Nebulis would be hypervigilant of them attempting to rescue Captain Mismis, which meant this team was sneaking into the stronghold with this knowledge.

...It'll take twenty minutes by car to get to the vortex from here.

...If we can, we need to save Captain Mismis within the hour.

They couldn't use the whole two hours to save the prisoners, because they would need to retreat to a safe zone before the bomb detonated.

"Iska?"

"I know..." He assented to Jhin, who lugged the sniper rifle over his shoulder. Iska pulled the astral swords strapped to his back into his hands. "...that we're going to need to beat *a purebred at that hideout.*"

"Within forty-five minutes. Then we'll have a purebred as our prisoner, and they'll have our soldiers. We might be able to negotiate to trade hostages. Defeat them in forty-five minutes and trade in fifteen. That'll be an hour."

Right.

A blood relative of Nebulis was just that valuable. If he could capture a purebred witch, they might be able to trade for nearly a dozen captured Empire soldiers. In order to take back the prisoners within the time they had, this was their best hand.

"The purebreds are bona fide monsters. They're unbelievable to say the least." Jhin climbed into the disguised car. "Even a Saint Disciple has their hands full trying to fend one off. If we can take one prisoner, that accomplishment will be the first of its kind in Empire history. If I say it outright, trading one for just a handful of Empire soldier prisoners is *cheap*. We should be using them to negotiate for peace between the two countries like Iska's always saying."

"...Well..."

They would have to apprehend this brutal opponent within an hour.

It was the most reckless gamble they had taken since the inception of Unit 907.

They had thrown in their coin.

Northeast area of Mudor Canyon.

In the terribly twisted cliff of the dimly lit canyon, the rift was illuminated by a faint green light. The diameter of the vortex spanned around ten yards. The bedrock of the valley had broken up in the shape of a gigantic hole, where the glow of the astral energy pooled.

It was like a pond of light.

Imagine a hot water spring and swap out the gurgling water with a glow of light. That's the sight that greeted any who drew near.

"Alice, careful where you step," he warned Alice, who was narrowly at the edge of the vortex hole. It was a man concealed in black clothes and a mask—one of the purebreds in the House of Zoa, Lord Mask. "We don't know its depth. If you go for a tumble, you might fall right into the bowels of the planet."

"Oh? Are you worried about me?"

"Of course I am," he proclaimed, as though he were a gentleman. "If you—the daughter of the current queen—were injured at a Zoa base, I imagine the populace wouldn't look at us very kindly."

"....." Just as she'd thought he was being unusually kind, he showed his true colors. This man might be the most patronizing person in the Sovereignty. "If you're so blunt about the way you say that, I can't even be angry with you."

"Nobility and Honesty are my middle names. Oh, and I've got one more thing to tell you, because I'm an honest man. There's a reason why it'll be a problem if you fall into this vortex."

"That's—" She thought for a while. "Because you think I'll become stronger if I fall into this vortex? It would mean the daughter of the queen would have more power and increase the House of Lou's influence."

"The color of the light doesn't match yours. I may not know what astral energy fills this pit, but I'm positive it's not yours—not ice. I'm sure you know that, too."

"Then, what's the reason?"

"It seems that the vortex is smaller than anticipated," he explained. His voice

was mixed with a rare annoyance. “Look at this light.”

“...I don’t think it’s reached full tide.”

They observed the astral light that filled the hole in the ground. At high tide, the astral energy would erupt and gush out like a volcano.

“No. It already has.”

“With this much?”

“It seems this astral energy is fickle. For the most part, it’s already flowed onto another location underground, which means this vortex will remain immature.” Lord Mask shrugged.

“I see. With a vortex this small, only a handful of mages will be able to receive its blessing. If I fell into the hole—”

“It would just be a waste of resources. According to the expert opinion of our researchers, it will only strengthen one or two people before we use it up completely.”

“This vortex really is a precious resource.”

“But it’s also good news. It means we can expend it quickly.”

Which made sense, since the Empire was after the vortex, too. If mages could consume its energy for all it was worth, the Empire wouldn’t be able to do anything about it, while Nebulis reaped all its benefits.

“Meaning we must find compatible mages as soon as possible—”

“We’ve finished choosing the candidates. Based on our analysis of the vortex, we’ve found five mages with a compatibility rating of over forty percent. All that’s left is to rank them in order to test it out.”

“...How efficient.”

By opening this can of worms, Alice could see the clear outline of Lord Mask’s scheme. Out of all the soldiers in the astral corps who swore their allegiance to the House of Zoa, he was attempting to make a mage with enough power to compete with a purebred.

Nonetheless, Alice had no way to object in this situation.

“Lord.”

“What’s wrong, Commander?” He turned around to find an officer of the base. The woman was not in the uniform of the astral corps—though neither was Alice in her royal dress and Lord Mask in formal wear—but a coat.

...Is this mage from the palace royal guards?

...Which means he went out of his way to dispatch these special soldiers from our home country to the front lines.

“Our kindred Shanorotte has returned. She has a new one in her possession—an Imperial army captain.”

“Just as I would expect.”

“And the report?”

“Of course, immediately. She’s done a splendid job. Alice, what would you like to do?”

“...I’ll accompany you.”

Taking along the guard, Lord Mask started to walk with a spring in his gait.

“Lord Mask, is Shanorotte the one who captured the Imperial units yesterday...?”

“Yes. A native-born spy, trained in the assassin unit from a young age.” He told her that they had sent mages to infiltrate the Imperial military school, where they trained to rise into the ranks of captains.

From what Alice had heard, the woman was a captain of a team of three Nebulis soldiers.

“To think you’d opt for the slow-and-steady plan.”

“The trick to beautiful flowers starts from sowing the seed. You need to be patient.”

They arrived at the base headquarters in a flat area that lay deep in the bottom of the canyon. Though it was a prefabricated building, it was sturdier than a wooden structure, resistant to fire, and surprisingly spacious. It was even equipped with an individual room for an unexpected visitor like Alice.

“Please wait here, Lord Mask and Lady Alice. I will bring Shanorotte.”

The area was covered in rugs. And though they were simple, the living room was outfitted with tables, chairs, and a sofa. The staff and Rin, who had been waiting at headquarters, sat there in a row.

“Lady Alice, you’ve returned. Would you like some water?”

“Thank you, Rin. I just had some tea. I’ll have to pass.”

As Rin came to accompany her, Lord Mask surveyed the scene, looking around at the waiting subordinates.

“Now then, all of you. We’ve done better than expected. In addition to finding the vortex, we’ve restrained several Imperial units. If we can return to the Sovereignty, that would be ideal. But—” Lord Mask turned his eyes to the wall.

The map of the canyon marked the position of the Imperial base.

“The Empire won’t just let us do that. We can anticipate that they’ll bombard the vortex. That would clean up the vortex and us. Two birds with one stone.”

“...What did you say?” Alice accidentally let out. “Wait, Lord Mask. Why would the Empire bomb this place? What about their imprisoned soldiers here?”

“That’s the Empire for you.”

“.....”

I see. She’d had her own thoughts on the matter, but it seemed that Lord Mask was the one who was right. This was different from the limited number of mages from Nebulis. The Empire could gather more forces by scouring their vast lands for human capital.

“They’ll bombard the vortex. This would be incredibly efficient for them. We may even call it their ideal solution. But since we know this is their best option, we can be one step ahead of them— Kissing.”

The black-haired girl snapped up her head.

She was wearing her blindfold that could be described as her symbol. The darling child slowly stood from her position curled on a sofa in a corner of the room.

“It’s about the short-range ballistic missiles of the Empire. This is just as we prepared for several weeks ago. *You think you can stop them?*”

“...Yes.”

“An excellent reply. No need to worry. You just need to do it as we practiced.” The masked man folded his arms, looking satisfied with her response. “But how unfortunate. If they plan to bomb us all at once, that Saint Disciple Nameless is unlikely to move out from his base over there. I thought this would be a great opportunity for you to flex your powers, Kissing.”

“The Saint Disciple Nameless... He was the ninth seat, right?”

Eleven people made up the personal guard of the Lord. They had the potential of putting a purebred in a tough situation if taken off guard. It was of the utmost importance to commit their characteristics to memory as one of the royal family.

“He is the eighth seat, Lady Alice,” Rin corrected her stealthily from behind. “It’s said he originated from the Fourth Division of the Empire—in other words, the assassin unit. He wears photochemical clothes developed by the Imperial capital, which makes identifying him simple enough. When he appeared in the past—”

“I—I know that much!” She’d *just* gotten his seat wrong.

Alice knew the other critical information about his appearance and fighting style.

...Speaking of Saint Disciples...

...Iska was one, too. Though he immediately was demoted.

“The Youngest Saint Disciple in History.”

“Imprisoned for treason against the nation and aiding the escape of a witch. Given a life sentence.”

If she’d learned this information only recently, why did she feel it had happened in the distant past?

“.....”

“Lady Alice?”

The door of the headquarters opened, and a girl with dull blond hair stepped inside. She was taller than Alice with a chiseled physique, still wearing on her full chest the Imperial battle uniform and decorations indicating she was a captain.

“There you are. Our comrade Shanorotte. You did well.”

“Thank you. But it wasn’t all me. If my subordinates hadn’t risked their lives, I wouldn’t be here.” Shanorotte lowered her head deeply.

When she raised her face, her expression had sunk.

“Hmm? How about you tell your story?”

“It seems the Saint Disciple found us out. Only I was able to make a break for it, carrying with me one of our enemies, but my three subordinates... I believe they are in the hands of the Empire.”

“I see. That must have been difficult.” Lord Mask patted Shanorotte’s shoulder as she bit her lip. He shook his head faintly. “Our precious kindred. I promise we will get them back.”

“No... Along with me, they were prepared to never step foot on the land of our home country again. Our only desire was to carry out your plan, sir.”

Oh, and— Her gloomy expression was crossed with a mad grin.

“I captured a prisoner as a distraction. As I was undercover with the detestable Imperial soldiers for a decade, I lived under the same roof as her. Though I seethed with anger on the inside...she never even noticed me, and the fool became an Imperial captain.” Shanorotte opened the door behind her.

The Imperial soldier in question stumbled forward, as though she’d been kicked in the back, with her arms bound.

“Serves you right. Oh, what’s the matter? How about you show us that smile you’ve always got on your face?”

“.....”

“She may look this way, but she’s still a captain. Hilarious, isn’t it?”

Shanorotte peered down on the soldier, who could have easily been mistaken for a teen.

She was smaller than the sixteen-year-old Rin with a full-on baby face. Coupled with her untidy blue hair, she wouldn't have passed as a captain if Shanorotte hadn't said so.

That captain raised her face in fear.

“—Huh?”

“—Excuse me?”

When Alice met the woman's eyes, she couldn't believe it.

“Pleasure to meet you, Imperial Captain. I am Alice.”

It was Captain Mismis.

Out of all people, it was the captain who led Iska's unit. It hadn't even been a month since she had introduced herself when they'd met in the neutral city of Ain.

“H-hmm? I feel like I've seen you before...” The captain looked dubiously up at Alice.

The woman had to remember Alice and Rin. The issue was this place.

...This is bad. This is really bad!

...I've never even told anyone in the Sovereignty that I met Iska at the neutral city.

If it came to light that the daughter of the queen of Nebulis was acquainted with an Imperial captain, it would be a national scandal. If she was careless, she could even think of the situation leading to her mother, the queen, being dethroned.

And most importantly, why was she here of all places?

“Um... You were...”

“A-are you sure you're not mistaking me for someone else?!” In a fluster, Alice turned her face away, but it was bad that she'd revealed her voice in a panic.

“Ohhh! I know! I remember!”

“What did you say?” Lord Mask and the staff collected at the headquarters grew suspicious.

They gulped and gazed intently at Captain Mismis, and her eyes opened wide.

“You’re Ali—”

“Go to sleep.” From her back, Rin had snuck up silently, karate-chopping the back of the captain’s head. “Speak no further.”

“.....” With her consciousness robbed from her with the single strike, she collapsed right where she was.

“Rin?”

“Pardon me, Lord Mask. But it doesn’t matter if you restrain her. Bringing an Imperial captain into the headquarters is just too imprudent. Don’t you agree, Shanorotte?”

“...Y-yes, you’re right.” The blond mage seemed crestfallen. “Please excuse my actions. Um, I thought it would be a distraction and brought her here, but I was acting thoughtlessly.”

“No need for you to be concerned. Now, Shanorotte, please take this soldier into the cages in the back. I will arrange a guard for her.”

As she listened in on Shanorotte and Lord Mask’s back-and-forth, Alice calmed her heart, relieved by her attendant’s wit.

“Rin, you made a great call.”

“It wasn’t as though I could allow her to talk about you, Lady Alice... However, it went beyond our expectations to meet her here. That Imperial captain and her swordsman. Why do these people stand in our way wherever we go?”

“...The Imperial swordsman.” Alice didn’t let that one get past her.

Yes, that’s right. Though she’d lost her composure at the unexpected situation, the fact that this captain had been caught had to mean that her subordinates had come to this canyon as well. Iska was also—

“It’s here! We’ve got the jackpot, Rin!”

“Y-yes...?”

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! This is it! This is the time for another battle!”

“Whaaat?! You can’t actually be serious, Lady Alice. Please wait! You’re losing your senses!”

“I do have my senses!” She closed her hand into a firm fist, abandoning Rin, who yelled next to her, and turned around. She looked back at the blond captain, who looked back at her in surprise. “Shanorotte, the position of the Imperial camp has not changed, right?”

“...Yes?”

“Your work (in finding Iska) has been superb. As the daughter of the queen, I must respond appropriately to your bravery.” She acted the part of the sweet and moral Nebulis princess.

Alice declared gallantly, not allowing anyone in that place to deny her: “Leave it to me. (In order to battle Iska) I will bring back the subordinates captured by the Empire!”

“W-will you really, Lady Alice? How wonderful!” Shanorotte exclaimed in a voice thick with emotion, on the verge of tears.

In the back of the room, Lord Mask folded his arms as he seemed to think something over. “Alice, are you saying you and Rin are going to the Imperial base alone?”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“It still contains over one hundred people... Hmm. I guess that’s a foolish question.”

She could almost see his wry smile under his mask.

If anyone knew the power of the Ice Calamity Witch Aliceliese, the pride of the Nebulis Sovereignty and the strongest military force contained in one person, they would know her words were not mere arrogance.

“If you say you’ll liberate my underlings, I have no reason to refuse. I gratefully leave it in your hands. Shanorotte, please lead her there.”

“No, Lord Mask. I am grateful for your consideration, but this is unnecessary. She’s just fulfilled an intense duty. Please let her rest. As for you, Lord Mask, please stay here with Kissing. If we expect a bombardment from the Empire, we must be perfectly prepared to strike back.”

...Well, actually...

...I just don’t want them to get in the way of my battle with Iska.

She didn’t let any sign of her heart’s desire show on her face. Alice turned her back to the personnel around her with a dauntless attitude.

“Rin, we will go immediately.”

“...Oh, come on. You never listen to anything I have to say after you’ve made up your mind.”

They left the headquarters behind.

Rin touched the face of the cliffs that towered over the base on both sides.

“Live.” The earth-type mage called forth her astral power.

The sturdy rock crumbled before their eyes, and Alice watched it reform into a giant. As though free will formed in the earth, the golem began to move and kneeled in front of Alice as though it were an actual soldier.

“Lady Alice, please make your way up here.”

Alice was held in the left arm of the golem. As for Rin, she nimbly leaped onto the giant’s shoulder.

“If I have it run, we should be able to reach the base within the hour, though I can’t guarantee it will be a comfortable ride.”

“Go as fast as possible. I don’t mind if it’s a bit rocky.”

“Please be careful not to get motion sickness.”

The earth golem was very deft. Though it wouldn’t be able to obtain the speed of an Imperial armored vehicle at full speed, its strong suit was that no matter what wilderness they encountered, it wouldn’t slow it down.

“Now, Godspeed, Rin. Iska is...no, our imprisoned mages are waiting for me!”

“...Iska.”

“What could you possibly be talking about?” She feigned ignorance of the slip of her tongue.

No, that didn’t matter anymore. She needed to calm her heart in preparation for the time that would come.

...How should I greet him when I see him? What kind of introduction will I need?

...You haven’t forgotten me, right, Iska?

Thump, thump, thump. Her heart pounded against her chest.

The sensation felt pleasant to her. She would soon see the person who allowed her to forget the strife within the Nebulis bloodline, who allowed her to forget her own position, who allowed her to forget all of it.

“.....” Alice kept her hand on her chest as she continued to look at the canyon’s surface.

But because her heart was aroused, Alice had completely overlooked something.

With the Empire’s bombardment approaching, there was a possibility Iska might have been hatching an inconceivable plan to recapture his captain with a three-person team.

3

The canyon was dyed crimson. With the sunset at their backs, the camouflaged Imperial car sped quickly down the mountainous terrain.

“Hmm. Iska, what do you think this is?” Nene, who was gripping the steering wheel, peeked her head out from the driver’s seat. “There are weird tracks here.”

“...They’re footprints.”

It looked like bipedal prints from something dragging its feet. The feet were wider than the camouflaged car. A colossal beast must have gone through the

area.

“A species of dragon? Or the golem of a mage?”

The footprints were coming from the Nebulis Sovereignty base at the bottom of the valley, heading toward the Imperial base that Iska and the others had just come from.

...Ex-Captain Shanorotte's subordinates are being held at the first base.

...Are these from the unit trying to bring them back?

Their car had probably just missed the owner of the footprints. If they would have been a few minutes off, they might have run into each other in that exact spot.

“Nene, stop the car. We’re getting off here.”

The car grazed the cliff. From the back seat, Jhin held his sniper rifle in a tight grip and stared intently down its edge.

“There are three guards acting as gatekeepers in front of the base. We can’t get any closer than this. If we go by car, we can’t do anything about the engine noise. They’d spot us before we’re even able to get down the slope.”

“Right. Then, we’ll go as planned.”

The car skidded to a halt.

Nene jumped out of the driver’s seat, carrying an 84-mm recoilless gun over her shoulder. It could fire artillery of the largest shell size possible for the physical strength of a girl like Nene.

They had smoke bombs, flares, and anti–astral power grenades.

“Nene, can you see it?”

“Wait, Jhin. I’m still adjusting the scope... Yeah, we’re good. I can look down and see about half the Nebulis base. There’s a large establishment in the back. I think it’s their headquarters.”

“Don’t fire yet.”

“Not until you and Iska have found her, right?” Nene lowered the recoilless rifle to the ground and winked.

Her role was to be on standby on top of the cliff.

Iska and Jhin would infiltrate the enemy base. Nene would watch them. When push came to shove, she would cover them with fire from above. As another last resort, *they would aim for the car, which was equipped with a function to self-detonate*, toward the bottom of the canyon and turn it into a car bomb. That was Nene's mission while she waited on top of the cliff.

"Guess it's time to go. The missiles will come down in about an hour. They'll probably blow away everything from the vortex to here, easy. We can't get caught up in that." The silver-haired sniper turned his feet toward the valley.

He had a handgun used for close combat on the holder at his hip and carried his favorite sniper rifle over his right shoulder.

...Once Jhin puts the three lookouts to sleep from long distance...

...that's when our time limit of one hour starts.

It would be ideal if they could infiltrate the base up to where the prisoners were held in just a few battles. If they failed and were surrounded, Nene would cover for them, and they would switch to overcoming the purebred.

They would restrain the purebred and then trade them for the Imperial prisoners. That was the hostage recovery plan Iska had thought up.

"Let's go."

Holding his astral swords, he first headed to the bottom of the canyon as he ran down the slope—when...

The cliff in front of him vanished.

"...What?!"

A torrent of wind mixed with small particles of fire raged at him. In order to keep his eyes from burning, Iska covered his face with both his hands and leaped back.

Had the cliff that sandwiched the canyon from the other side exploded?

In that second, that was all Iska could understand. When he realized it, the cliff had thoroughly broken to pieces, and giant amounts of rock had broken off

and pitched down to the abyss below.

...Is this an astral attack?

...Did the astral corps see us?!

No, that wasn't it. If the chunks of rock were crumbling downward, the Nebulis base would be sustaining the most damage. If this was an astral attack, the mages would have aimed at them more directly.

"Is it the missiles?! Just now...that was the short-range missile from the base!" Nene screamed in a raspy voice as she lay close to the ground where the shock wave had expanded.

"This is a lot earlier than planned!"

"...Nameless. Is this how you do things?"

Nene had gathered information about the start time of the bombing from the missile engineers. But this was an hour earlier than expected. They probably hadn't even allowed time for maintenance of the missiles or alignment. They had just prioritized making the launch happen as quickly as possible.

"Nene, when's the second going to be?!"

".....In thirty—no, twenty minutes from now." Nene looked up at the scud clouds in the sky above. "They got trajectory data from that attack just now, so I think they'll recalibrate to be more accurate. Next time, I'm sure they'll make a direct hit on the vortex. What are we going to do...?"

In twenty minutes, the canyon spread below their eyes would be reduced to ash—without a hint of its original shape.

And the vortex would be blown to smithereens, too.

The army base of the Nebulis Sovereignty and everything would undoubtedly burn down without so much as leaving behind any rubble.

"Nene, drive! Jhin, get in!" Iska shouted, climbing into the back seat himself.

Jhin and Nene had figured out what he intended, sliding into the car two seconds after Iska.

"Nene, sorry, but can you...?"

“You want me to drive right into the enemy encampment, right?!”

As the cloud of dust continued to rise and envelop them, the car kicked up even more debris as it rushed out on a pathless road. They slipped through a gigantic hole in a huge boulder bigger than the car, racing along the sudden downward slope.

“Iska.” Jhin had been staring intently forward from the back seat the whole time and pointed at the ceiling right above his head. “I’ll go up. *This thing’s in my way.*”

“Got it.”

The black blade glittered.

With a flick of his wrist, the astral blade in his hand went right back into his scabbard. Accompanied by the loud sound of the sword ringing out, the roof of the car was severed and flew off. The wind rushed at them from the opposite side.

“I expected the wind. The sunlight is a little bright, but...well, it’s within permissible limits.” Getting hit by the setting sun from the side, the silver-haired sniper stood from his seat.

He aimed the sniper rifle’s scope forward.

“Jhin, you want me to go slower?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

The car rushed down the cliff at high speed. In front of it, Iska could vaguely make out the Nebulis base with his naked eyes.

There were two mages at the entrance.

“What—?”

“The Empire?! They couldn’t have sent assassins at this point...!”

They were the lookout unit, readying themselves. As the falling rocks and sparks poured over their heads from the impact of the missile, they worked to respond to the unprompted surprise attack from the Imperial army. Of course, they had to be the cream of the crop.

However, Jhin worked faster than those mages.

“You’re a move behind.” He shot them in succession.

First the bullets destroyed the communications devices; then they went through the battle uniforms of the astral corps.

He had aimed for the seams.

The Nebulis battle uniforms had been made terrifically sturdily so they could stand up to the Imperial guns. The white-silver robes that had been woven with threads of metal could even withstand simultaneous fire from a machine gun. Because of that, Jhin aimed for the seams where the protection was at its weakest.

He did it as they moved.

On top of that, because the setting sun was backlighting them, he did it mostly with his eyes closed.

“Go, Iska.”

At the sniper’s voice, Iska wordlessly answered by leaping, jumping out from the back seat to close in on the two soldiers who were still trying to stand in front of the gate. With his astral swords, he completely pummeled them to the ground.

“Nene, do a zigzag. Drive like you’re drunk.”

“Got it, Jhin.”

“If you want, you can have a drink to drive.”

“But I’m still a minor!”

The Imperial car with the two of them rushed into the enemy base. She turned on the lights and honked the horn as though trying to gain the attention of the astral corps.

...A change of plans.

...We need to finish this before the next missile is launched.

From here, Iska would be working alone incognito. He stifled his breathing and drew near to the shadow of the carport.

“Where would Captain Mismis be? ...Whoa, I guess I’m in danger here, too.”
He stooped and withdrew.

From the top of the cliff, a rock had toppled over, pummeling down to Iska’s head. It was about as large as a fist, but since it had fallen from several hundred yards up, it would have been lethal even if it were a tiny pebble.

Embers showered him. The ignition equipped in the rocket was burning furiously on top of the cliff, and the spray of fire poured down onto the bottom of the canyon like rain.

“We will retreat to the second designated area!” From the structure that seemed to be the headquarters, a witch who was apparently in charge revealed herself.

She wore a slender coat open wide down her chest and a large astral crest appeared on her left cheek like a tattoo.

“Just as Lord Mask anticipated, the Empire has started a bombardment. Lady Kissing is responding, but she will need a few minutes for her attack. Everyone except the firefighting and communications parties should prioritize taking refuge.”

“Captain! What about the Imperial vehicle that just invaded...?!”

“You can ignore it,” she told the subordinate in a cold tone, turning her eyes to glare at the carport where Iska was hiding. “Once Lady Kissing attacks, we will take care of them. It would be more dangerous if another assassin had snuck in using that car as a diversion. They may be using the bombardment in order to recover the prisoners or assassinate someone important. In either case, do not be off your guard. That was Shanorotte’s advice.”

She was talking about the lightning witch Shanorotte Gregory.

When Iska heard the name of the mastermind responsible for taking his unit captain, he internally clucked his tongue.

...As expected from the former captain.

...She might as well have been listening in on our improvised plan.

The military car carrying Jhin and Nene was a decoy. They had even realized

that Iska was the shoo-in for heading over to rescue the prisoners.

“I’ll say it again. My fellow kindred, retreat to the appointed secondary location. Lady Kissing will respond to the bombardment. We will use the vortex after that. There is no need to panic.”

“Commander, what will we do about the prisoners?”

“Shanorotte will take them to our homeland... That is all. I will go back to aid Lord Mask.” The mage who appeared to be in charge turned on her heel.

At the same time, the astral corps who had lined up turned to the carport that concealed Iska one after another and ran toward it to use cars to evacuate from the bombardment.

“...Guess they’ll find me here.” He slipped out of the shadows around to the back side of the building adjacent.

Over twenty mages were rushing toward him. Which wasn’t impossible for him to take on, especially with a surprise attack. But ten minutes had already passed leading up to the second missile’s launch. He didn’t have the time or energy to do this.

“They’re taking the prisoners? No way...”

There had never been an Imperial soldier who had been taken into the Nebulis Sovereignty’s possession and come back. He had to stop them, no matter what.

“Okay, stand up, Captain Mismis.”

“...No...ro...”

“The same old phrase. I’m so disappointed. I’m telling you to stand up!”

He heard an angered voice, followed closely by a small shriek.

“Captain Mismis?!”

To hear her hoarse voice among the footsteps and orders of the astral corps? The best worst-case scenario. He peeked half his body out from the building. What came into view right in front of Iska’s eyes wasn’t Mismis.

It was the unnaturally strong barricade.

The back was covered with a tarp. He saw two more soldiers posted there as lookouts. They appeared obstinate, as though they were practically saying they would allow no one to pass through.

...What is that?

...That strange place. It's guarded more than the headquarters.

Iska was distracted for a moment.

"Ugh, that's bright...?!"

A light gushed up. The sheet that had been covering the barricade blew up, and a brilliant green light glittered and surged into the setting sky.

Astral light?

The exposed ground caved in like the opening of a volcano. The bottom of the crater was cracked, and from those fissures, energy overflowed out.

"...The vortex?!"

"That's right. Aren't you a smarty, Captain Mismis?"

The captain, whose hands were restrained, looked up as she was pulled along.

"Ahhh, we just covered it with a sheet, but it's blown it away again. I didn't think that astral energy would start becoming active again right now." With a wry smile, Shanorotte looked up at the particles of light that erupted like a geyser.

"It's as though it's getting all worked up to welcome you, Mis."

"Huh?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha, there's no way it would, of course. There's no way astral energy would welcome someone from the Empire. The only ones able to receive its grace are mages who live in harmony with it." Shanorotte forcibly tugged at the rope that was connected to the collar on Mismis's neck. "Now, hurry up and get moving."

"...Ugh...cough...ah...ugh...uh..."

Iska could hear the sounds of Mismis's anguished voice as she was strangled. As she looked down at her former colleague who cried and sobbed, the

lightning witch's smile turned dangerous.

"Or do you want me to pull harder?"

"...No... Please...stop..."

"Don't look at me like that. I just end up wanting to yank it even harder. Well, then, guess I'll give it a good tug right now." The witch started to jerk the rope.

Snap. The rope connected to Mismis's collar tore and went flying.

"...Huh?!"

"Guess I got too carried away." Shanorotte seemed to not have noticed.

She hadn't noticed that Iska had already closed in on her from the front.

"Give back my captain."

"Tch. I was wondering who it was, and it turned out to be Mismis's subordinate!"

Lightning surged up, birthed from her astral crest, traveling through Shanorotte's fingertips and assaulting Iska. Enough lightning to obliterate a person welled up from her.

"Too late."

In that moment, it was cut by the black sword Iska swung and disappeared without a trace.

"My lightning...?"

There was no way of evading the lightning that approached with speed that far surpassed that of a cannonball. Even if he aimed and cut at it, that wouldn't have been a skill that a human could possibly possess. It would have been nothing more than the product of coincidence.

"You Imperial soldier!" The witch once again released lightning from her fingertips.

But Iska used his astral sword to cut the lightning with speed as though he were divinely possessed.

"—Impossible?!"

“I can’t cut through lightning in time with a sword.” He aimed at Shanorotte’s chest. “But seeing when you invoke it is easy.”

“...You couldn’t have.”

“That’s right. It’s your astral crest.”

It was at the base of the witch’s neck—the yellow crest that illuminated each time she would invoke her astral attack. After that, he just had to cut through the trajectory between the woman’s fingertips and his position.

Though even that had come from his training long ago.

“You got too carried away and showed your astral crest to us. That was a mistake.”

“What an annoying trick... We’re being raided by an enemy. What are the soldiers at the gate doing? Get over—”

“You haven’t noticed?”

The vortex that had started forming was in front of them.

Only Iska and Shanorotte were standing there. The two guards had collapsed to the ground after being hit by Iska’s surprise attack before they could even make a sound.

“.....You Imperial soldier...” The former captain swayed and leaned against the barricade. “You... What are you...?”

Iska silently closed the distance between them. In another step, he would probably be within range for his astral sword to reach her.

But something happened at his back—where incredibly quiet steps approached him.

“Th... Th-there..... There it is... There.....”

It was a girl’s voice.

She was at the back of the vortex where Iska and Shanorotte were turned to. She had probably come from around the back side of the round barricade.

“—”

It was a black-haired girl with a blindfold over her eyes.

She appeared around thirteen or fourteen. She was petite and thin, lacking in curves, but in contrast, her dress was gorgeous and dazzling, as though it might have been worn to a ball. She looked almost exactly like a doll. The girl stared intently at Iska.

...Is she looking at me?

...But a blindfold hides her eyes.

She seemed too eerie.

In the first place, it was already so unnatural for someone within a sea of Nebulis battle uniforms to be wearing such an eye-catching dress by herself.

In Iska's memory, the only time he had seen anything close to it was...with the Ice Calamity Witch Alice.

Alice had appeared in formal Nebulis attire, dressed most closely to the person in front of him. Which meant...

"It couldn't be..."

"Lady Kissing!" Shanorotte's voice called out in joy. "You came to our aid!"

"__"

The girl called Kissing was silent.

Had she not heard? No. As though to show that she had no interest in the subordinate behind her, the black-haired girl seemed to turn in the opposite direction.

"The... The... The thorn...h-hurts..... It hurts..."

She looked above her head, up above, into the sky opposite of where the sun set, and raised her right hand.

"The thorn."

He suddenly felt a mysterious presence approaching. In front of where the blindfolded girl pointed up her hand, countless black needles manifested themselves and blanketed the crimson-dyed sky.

“Disappear.”

Thorns soared through the sky like a horde of bees, condensing into a point and enveloping something in the air. *The sky split.*

“Is it a short-range missile from the Empire?!”

It was the second launch from the southwest part of Mudor Canyon where the base was positioned. The missiles, which flew toward the vortex in that moment, were stopped in the sky above just as they were about to come down.

...No, she's not so innocent if she could stop that.

...That's...

The missiles unleashed a massive explosion in the sky, enveloped in those thorns and shrinking down smaller and smaller. The fire and the blast, all the small pieces and fragments of the missile that had been blown up, were *pierced by the thorns and disappeared as though they'd been erased.*

“.....You've got to be kidding me.” He could feel his face breaking out into a cold sweat.

Mismis and the mage Shanorotte were speechless at the incredibly eerie, indescribable scene they had collectively witnessed. She had nullified the threat—a large, oppressive weapon from the Empire. No, she had just made it disappear.

If this girl could attack a midsize neutral city on a whim, she could have made the entire town disappear from the face of the planet in less than an hour.

“Erasure complete... For my uncle... I've completed...one of your... commands.” She spoke as though she had finished going on a shopping errand for her uncle at a nearby store. That was the extent of the emotions in her voice.

“...This is Lady Kissing. She is the secret weapon of the House of Zoa,” Shanorotte said in a hoarse voice.

However, the blond witch immediately spread out her hands with an exalted look, as though she could not hold back her excitement.

“Spectacular!” she raved. “That is the bloodline of the Revered Founder. Now,

Lady Kissing, use your astral power to punish these foolish soldiers!"

"—"

It was the purebred Kissing. She once again turned to Iska and Mismis with the blindfold over her eyes. She had an expression that was the same as when she had disappeared the missiles.

"You think you can do it?"

There was a flash of silver. The beautiful timbre of metal rang out as he broke through the handcuffs that restrained Mismis.

"—gh..." Kissing's mouth tensed.

She hadn't been able to respond.

The Imperial soldier had drawn his sword and cut through the handcuffs of the prisoner next to him with a single stroke of his sword. That extremely simple act had probably registered as a momentary magic trick.

"Please keep back, Captain."

"Iska?!"

"I'll be fine. If anything, I feel more motivated than ever."

He faced a terrifically powerful purebred, motivated *because* he faced a mage who the Empire loathed and called a witch.

"You're definitely part of Nebulis's bloodline, right?"

"....."

"It's fine. I'll battle you."

She was part of the founder Nebulis's direct line.

If she was one of the purebreds who the Nebulis Sovereignty had retained, that was exactly what he wanted. He had come in order to have this fight.

"Imperial soldier." The black-haired girl spread out both her arms. "I'll erase you. Those were my orders."



“Too bad! I’m going to defeat you and take you to the Empire!”

Black thorns floated over the witch’s head.

Glaring at those barbs, which continued to increase until there were hundreds, thousands of them, Iska launched himself off the ground.

4

The southwest section of Mudor Canyon.

The Imperial base that had been set up in a corner was illuminated, floating into view behind the sunset. The military tents and armored vehicles and the launch platforms that had probably been prepared for the short-range missiles had been left as is.

“Guess it’s deserted.”

The Imperial campground was completely devoid of people.

Alice looked down as the dry wind pushed forward pumice stones that tumbled, and she spoke in the entrance of the Imperial base. She knew there was a slight amount of annoyance mixed into her own voice.

...I thought Iska would be here.

...What is the meaning of this? Did Captain Mismis come to the canyon by herself?

She brought Rin with her as she started to walk through the base grounds.

“Lady Alice, please take a look at that device for launching missiles.”

“Yes. I also just saw it turn to the sky and launch.”

It was as Lord Mask had surmised. There was no mistaking that it had targeted the vortex. If it had directly hit the bottom of the canyon, the Nebulis base would have been decimated at around that time.

“My fellow mages...”

“Lord Mask expected the missiles. We do not need to worry ourselves about them.”

The purebred Kissing.

Even Alice didn't know what kind of astral energy dwelled in that girl with black hair. At any rate, she was the favorite of the House of Zoa. The only person in the House of Lou who could have known of her powers was Sisbell, who had the power of burning light.

...It does bother me.

...What kind of power could protect against the Empire's large-scale weapons?

She earnestly progressed directly into the empty base. "What do you think, Rin?"

"This is going to be tough." Rin, who had scouted one of the back tents, continued with a timid look on her face. "That tent was used by the Empire's communication unit. The machinery has been left behind, but I did not see any unit members."

"In that case, I suppose we can bring back the equipment as a gift to the Sovereignty."

"It was all destroyed. I believe they must have transported it with the intent of disposing of it from the start."

"...I see."

The Empire's technique of creating machines was years beyond the Nebulis Sovereignty. She had thought she would have been able to take them home as reference for the Sovereignty's engineers.

"In other words, you're saying that the Empire abandoned the base as soon as they discharged the missile? Why would they do that?"

"There's a chance it could be a trap. For example... I think it's possible there might be large-scale bombs buried under the ground, and they might be triggered by us passing through here," Rin said, but there was no hesitation in her footfalls.

Those with the astral power of earth could feel whether there was something underground. Just as she had prepared the transport golem, the merit of her power was that it had a wide range of uses.

“If it’s not a trap, then that means they must have simply run.”

“Yes, in which case...”

The wind tickled the top of her hair.

While Alice felt the uncomfortably warm zephyr pass by her back, Rin had been walking next to Alice, suspiciously pouncing at Alice like a wild animal.

“Rin?!”

“Pardon me!”

She was pushed aside by Rin’s outstretched arms.

Alice saw Rin’s hands were suddenly sliced through. Blood flew out of them.

“Ugh...why, you!”

“Good intuition for a witch. You’re no mere servant. Well, it does not matter. One witch is about the same as two.”

In front of their gazes, the air quavered like a heat wave, moving in a place where nothing should have been present. A creepy person wearing a dark-gray suit from head to toe gradually appeared.

“...Nameless.”

“A witch with brains.” He was the personal guard of the Lord—a Saint Disciple, a person of the strongest battle force in the Empire to which Iska once belonged. He spoke in a monotonous voice.

...Right, witches.

...He really is an Imperial soldier to use that derogatory word.

“Nice to meet you. Well, this is sudden, but I’m very irritated right now.”

“About what?”

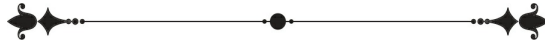
“My bout of bad luck that’s caused me to miss him by a hair. I thought the person I wanted to finally settle things with would be here.”

She really shouldn’t have gone to that casino. It seemed she’d used up all the luck that should have guided her to a meeting with Iska when she won that jackpot.

“So—” She ordered Rin and the peerlessly powerful astral energy that dwelled inside her.

Alice had a dauntless smile on her face. “I don’t suppose you’ll let me take my anger out on you?”

CHAPTER 6



A Superhuman Dances with a Witch

1

She was Kissing, the astral mage of thorns, a direct descendant of the Founder Nebulis. She moved her small mouth, looking almost exactly like an actual witch chanting a hex.

“Th-thorns..... Th-thorns..... Come to me.....”

The air quavered audibly. If he had to describe it, it was like the unpleasant racket of tens of thousands of insects taking flight at once. The thorns materialized into sight around the girl, snaking into one piece—a whip embedded with needles like barbed wire.

It was several dozen yards long.

“Captain Mismis, crouch down!”

The whip groaned, coiling in the air as if a twisted snake before unfurling its power on a curved trajectory to assault Iska and Mismis on the ground.

...Its movements are almost slow.

...But trying to predict its irregular path is a real pain.

It drew an arc rather than a straight line, as with swords and arrows. It wasn't far off the mark to say this writhing course was characteristic of whips alone.

And plus, he was dealing with an astral one.

Which meant it probably wouldn't move like a normal whip. That was why Iska leaped back instead of meeting it with his sword. Or he thought he had—until the attack changed paths to hunt him down.

“Ugh! I knew it!” Her whip closed the distance with the tip of his nose.

Seeing its appearance of barbed wire, he’d imagined it would be unpliable, but he could observe up close that bending whip had elongated as if from its own will.

“Iska?!”

He didn’t have time to respond as he bent down far enough for his face to nearly touch the ground. With an eruption of strange sound, the collection of thorns grazed the top of his head to the barricade behind Iska. The astral whip blasted through it to dismantle its steel fencing—liquefying it before it disappeared completely.

“.....Did I fail at my order? Did he dodge it?” The witch turned around.

In her right hand, she held her whip, touching the blindfold with her left as she tilted her head in puzzlement.

“Were you supposed to do that? Wasn’t that fence to protect your precious vortex?” Iska readied his two swords, glaring at the thorny whip in Kissing’s grip.

“Shanorotte,” called out the witch to the subordinate behind her. “Kindred.”

“Y-yes, Lady Kissing! I am here and ready for orders to—”

“You’re in the way.”

“What?”

“Get out of the way. With you here...I can’t...broaden the range of my astral power.”

The whip dispersed into thousands of tiny needles floating around Kissing.

“.....Become ‘Stars.’”

The thorns shot up into the setting sky before freezing in place, hanging there for a moment. And then, as though a dam was breaking, they rained down to the ground.

They were like shooting stars—zooming toward the ground at a terrific speed, piercing through everything on ground level. The roofs of the carports dissolved as though melting. Even the transport vehicles inside and walls of the carport

liquefied.

“A sweeping assault, huh? Captain, get back!” He pointed away from the range of the thorns before gripping his black astral sword and stepping forward. “—Hah!”

He breathed out and swiveled in place before dashing, weaving through the infinite number of stars plunging down from above. Iska did not stop for a step as he headed toward the purebred Kissing.

As he readied his sword and swiveled full circle, Iska obliterated the stars behind him, catching the thorns that had bounced off the ground toward him.

To those that ricocheted and assaulted him, Iska swung his sword, smashing through them.

“...Why, you?!” A shriek of fear and fury came from the witch Shanorotte.

There were two things she found incomprehensible.

First, she couldn't understand why Kissing's astral attack couldn't eliminate one Imperial soldier, despite having enough power to literally disintegrate missiles—much less why these thorns could be broken into smithereens.

And then there was the question of the unbelievable physical capabilities of the Imperial soldier.

He was unstoppable.

He sped through the gaps among the thorns, continuing to swing his sword. If it were for a single moment, Shanorotte would have been able to do the same. But any more than ten seconds? She would be completely out of breath.

However, Iska seemed to accelerate.

He specialized in attacks against mages, training his body with the sole purpose of defeating them.

“You brute!” Shanorotte unleashed a bolt of lightning, which shot after him.

But when he read her attack and mowed it down with his astral sword, the lightning witch was at a loss for words. To see him sidestep the thorny attack of a purebred and still sense something coming at him from behind... Even if

Shanorotte had tried shooting at him with the automatic handgun from the Empire tucked away in her pocket, it would have been the same story.

“.....” The witch with the blindfold scowled. “Who are you?” Her faint voice spilled from her lips. “...Wh...? How? ...Why won’t my...attacks reach...you...?”

“That’s your weak point.”

When Kissing took a step back, Iska took two steps forward.

...Her defensive moves and power to hold back the missile’s blast aren’t undeveloped.

...I’m sure her astral power is unbelievable, but...

There was something that this young mage didn’t have—something in the possession of Alice and the Founder Nebulis.

“You made your mistake when you said she was ‘in the way.’”

“...?”

“Can’t unfurl your power to the fullest extent unless your subordinate moves? It’s because she’d end up caught in it, right? You just admitted that you don’t have a good handle on your astral power. You can’t even aim correctly.”

She didn’t have accuracy.

He had been convinced once he saw her bring down a rain of thorns on the carport and structures to make them all disappear.

“Ice Calamity—Blizzard of a Thousand Thorns.”

“A thousand swords coming from all directions. Dodge them if you can.”

In their past interactions, Alice had brought forth ice blades that aimed straight for Iska—but Kissing’s attacks were different.

This young witch was still growing. She couldn’t aim the thorns at Iska, meaning bringing them down in his vicinity was all she could manage.

“Th-th-th...that was unexpected... A formidable opponent. Are you a Saint Disciple...?” She looked at the point of his astral sword, spreading her arms wide.

“Ability release.”

“What?!”

“Reform.”

A black shadow formed above their heads.

When Iska snapped his head up, he saw the short-range missile that had been dissolved by the thorns.

“You can reform the things you disintegrated?!”

“...Imperial soldier... Disappear.”

Those were the witch’s words.

Above Iska’s head, the missile exploded in an enormous blaze.

2

The ground was frozen solid. On the Imperial campgrounds, the top layer of the russet dirt was being pushed from below to reveal a layer of glittering ice, where a front column jutted out of the earth.

Alice brought the surrounding temperature down below freezing before anyone could so much as blink, and the moisture in the ground frosted over. The chill subdued the area in all directions for several hundred yards.

“Prepare yourself, Imperial dog.”

“Shut up, witch. I’m disgusted, just breathing the same air as you.”

“...I’ll freeze you right with your arrogance.” Alice brought her arm up and leveled it.

It didn’t matter whether she was battling a Saint Disciple.

But she noticed something, just when she was about to order her astral energy to encase the campground in ice without allowing anyone to put up any resistance.

Her astral power was slow.

“This is...” A beautiful, glittering wall of ice rose up.

Before she could command it, the astral energy had prioritized forming the ice wall in front of Alice.

Why?

Her doubts were almost immediately dispelled, as the moment the ice wall had been erected, it collided with a monumental mass.

“...An automatic defense, huh? I was hoping to smash in your skull.”

Alice saw it before her eyes. The man who wore reactive camouflage all over his body had slammed his fist against the wall.

She heard something rupturing.

Could this be the sound of a human fist?

This was no joking matter. It sounded almost as if a large-scale Imperial tank shell had directly hit against it. She felt a bead of sweat trickle down her face. She knew he would be more powerful than usual, and when directly threatening her, this man had approached her with such speed that Alice hadn't been able to react.

“The astral power of ice needs to lower the temperature of the air around it before it can be invoked.”

Crack. A fissure formed in the ice wall in front of Alice's eyes. The wall wouldn't have been harmed even if something with the force of an automatic handgun had shot at it, but now it was breaking.

This can't be happening from just a punch, can it?

“The astral power of ice is too slow. Even if it functions as a sudden automatic defense, this is all you seem able to manage.” The Saint Disciple's fist smashed Alice's ice wall to shards.

“It's over.” Nameless's fingertip touched the base of Alice's neck.

He tried to grip her neck to crush her delicate windpipe, but she couldn't allow that. Before Nameless could crush the witch's neck, his fingertips were frozen in ice, all the way down to the wrist of his right hand.

“Whose energy did you call slow?”

She didn't fall behind. If the Saint Disciple Nameless was superhuman, the Ice Calamity Witch Alice was a superior astral mage.

“Please don't think all ice energies are the same.”

“...Oh, what do we have here?” Pulling his arm back, Nameless laughed.

He easily crushed the ice restraining the freedom of his fingers and once again turned to Alice as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“So you're the Ice Calamity Witch.”

“Weren't you the one telling me to shut up?”

“I've changed my mind,” the former assassin replied jovially.

Starting up his active camouflage suit, the Saint Disciple's form seemed to melt and disappear into the sunset.

“A direct descendant of the Founder. I wonder how long your sense of loftiness will last you.”

“I don't intend to battle you with words.” Before he completely disappeared, Alice snapped her fingers. “Take that.”

The red-dyed ground cracked. Pushing up the hard surface, ice needles crawled out from its depths, and the ice pillars all over the ground sharpened their ends. If he had been wearing leather boots, the pillars would have pierced right through them easily. If his shoes had contained an iron sole, he would have been frozen down to the ground.

“Tch.” The half-transparent Saint Disciple leaped, escaping from both his feet freezing to the ground.

Though that in itself was a miracle of reactionary speed, it was within Alice's expectations.

...He's a Saint Disciple just like Iska.

...Of course he would be able to evade this.

“Ice Calamity—Blizzard of a Thousand Thorns.”

Fwhst. She could hear ice condense to form blades.

From the frozen ground, from the surrounding atmosphere, and even from the military tents which were covered in frost, all kinds of small and large blades formed one after another.

“You’ll either be skewered on the ice blades or frozen to death. Choose your own adventure.”

“Hah.” As he landed on the ground, the Saint Disciple laughed, glancing around at the ice blades that surrounded him from all directions and, instead of being intimidated, dashed toward Alice. *“You think you can stop me with your little tricks?”*

“...Bore through!” She swung her arms up. At her command, the ice blades came crashing down indiscriminately at the feet of the Saint Disciple Nameless, from above his head and at his back.

“You’re slow.” They whizzed past his side by less than an inch as he tilted his head.

He went as far as raising his foot and kicking away a blade from the ground, using the momentum to flip in the air and punching those hounding him from behind and up top.

“And these are frail.” The icicles shattered into a thousand pieces.

It was an unbelievable scene for Alice. “...No way.”

She created ice that was stronger than steel. Of course, this all depended on the scale of her attack, but something as thin and sharp as her blades couldn’t be broken by a mere human fist.

She knew right from the moment he had destroyed her ice wall earlier.

But just how—?

Just how much stronger was this ex-assassin compared to a normal person?

“But it’s all for naught!”

Blood gushed out of Nameless’s shoulder. He could snap a dozen blades—even several dozen—but he wouldn’t be able to escape them all. Even Iska

hadn't been able to completely defend himself from this astral attack.

"You can't move when you're in checkmate."

In her arsenal was one larger than the rest—the length of a javelin—flying toward Nameless's undefended back.

...This piece of ice is stronger than steel.

...Try to see if you can break that apart!

All he could do was straightforwardly dodge it. But when he would jump to get away from it, the blade would change aim and follow Nameless.

The distance between Nameless and Alice hadn't closed at all. Even if he threw a glass dagger at her, her automatic astral defenses would trigger in time to protect her.

"This is my victory—," she started.

"If you'd have been facing anyone other than me."

Alice was the one who ended up speechless.

Nameless turned around, stretching his arm toward the ice javelin that came at him with the speed of a bullet.

"How about I send it back at you?" He gripped the javelin, twirling it in his hand until he turned the point toward Alice. It was almost as though he was saying he had the perfect projectile to aim at her.

...He anticipated the moment of a piece of ice flying at the same speed as a bullet and stopped it.

...He's insane. No, worse... He's a monster!

If he was acting like Iska, holding his ground with his swords, she would have found it reasonable. But this man was using his bare hands. She had never met anyone up until this point who had been able to take on her astral attacks through martial arts—not from the Empire or the Sovereignty.

"...Saint Disciple Nameless." Alice chewed her lip.

She didn't want to recognize his power, but this man was clearly the real deal.

“Gah!” Alice jumped aside, biting her lip out of disgrace. A Nebulis princess withdrawing? Shameful. She went back to Rin, who waited behind her back.

...This is bad.

...I don't mind Imperial handguns or missiles, but this... This is the only thing that would be bad!

“Disappear, you witch.” Nameless hurled the ice javelin at her. The lethal weapon floated to a stop right before it would have pierced through Alice.

“I’m sorry. I went too far.”

“No, Rin. You saved me.” Alice thanked the attendant, who had protected her.

Rin had spread out her skirt like a cape in order to stop the projectile that Nameless had propelled at them. The cloth had been made from anti-blade fibers. It had no trouble stopping the icicles.

The only problem was that Alice had made Rin promise to be hands-off when it came to battle.

That Rin had broken that principle meant that Alice had been in that much danger.

“.....”

“What’s wrong? Where’s your energy?”

“...I apologize for my rudeness. Saint Disciple of the eighth seat, I doubted your strength.” She pinched the hem of her dress with her right hand and brought it up very slightly.

It was common etiquette in every corner of the world. In aristocratic society, it was known as the greeting that a young lady would give to a gentleman in a standing above her.

“This is just a slight expression of my apology.”

“Laughable.” He chortled with scorn until his shoulders shook. “A witch? A witch acting like a human aristocrat?”

“Yes, that’s right. But it seems that my intent hasn’t gotten through. Let me

break it down for you. This isn't a hello; it's a good-bye."

"...What?"

"I'll show you what I've really got in me." She displayed cold hostility with a gaze that could have frozen anything, glaring at the superhuman.

...Unfortunately for you...

...You've convinced me to go all out.

By the time Nameless realized the meaning of the piercing look in her eyes, it was too late.

"Good-bye, Saint Disciple."

"Great Ice Calamity—"

It was a world of frost.

From the ground to the sky. The military tents and vehicles in the campgrounds and the missile launchers and everything else were covered in white fog as if in a dream. In the next moment, the whole area of the canyon that included the campgrounds was encased in ice that gleamed a bright blue.

Shhhk. The sludge squished underfoot.

"Rin, are you okay?"

"If I weren't, that would be a matter of serious concern."

Only Alice and Rin stood atop the hill of ice. This astral attack was the mark of the menace—of Aliceliese the Ice Calamity Witch.

It was indiscriminate and hit in all directions.

Her opponent could be people, or tanks, or missiles, and she could still envelop them in the maximum chill and encase them in ice—no questions asked. Even the Saint Disciple Nameless had no way of protecting himself against it, encased in the ice.

...Well, the issue with this technique is that it's the only one I can't fine-tune.

...I can't use it when my own kin are around.

If she made one wrong move, she would freeze her own friends.

On top of that, Alice herself couldn't even automatically dispel the attack. It would likely take the whole frozen canyon area several days to melt.

"Let's head back, Rin. I wanted to actually capture him and go home, but it'd be a pain to try to dig him up."

"It would have been better if we could have made him into an actual prisoner, though."

"That's—"

If luck allows for it. Alice heard a tiny sound before she could finish her sentence.

Were they footsteps? She turned around to see a sharp fragment of ice graze past her.

"Ugh!"

"Lady Alice?!"

"No...I'm fine, Rin. Just a little scratch." She put her hand to her cheek, where she drew a little blood onto her fingertips.

It had been a fragment of ice. She could think of only one person who could have thrown it.

"...Huh. Guess I wasn't thorough enough." Looking down at the blood on her hand, Alice let a wry smile slip onto her mouth.

Nameless. The superhuman performance of the man finally sunk in. Nonetheless, she had made a mistake by giving him an unnecessary hint.

"I'll show you what I've really got in me," she had said.

The Saint Disciple had probably gathered her next astral attack from her declaration. Because he had realized she would release the bold technique she was known for as the Ice Calamity Witch, she had given him a moment to prepare.

"Lady Alice, let's go back to the Nebulis camp as quickly as possible. We must disinfect the wound on your cheek."

"This is nothing." She wiped away the blood on her cheek with her fingertips.

The cut itself was nothing. The real problem was entirely separate.

“...Rin.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think he found us out?”

“I’m willing to bet on it, especially considering he went out of his way to hurl broken shards of ice instead of his own daggers.”

“.....I see.”

The cut on her cheek. If it had been an Imperial knife, Alice’s astral energy would have sensed the threat and gone into auto-defense mode. But this time, it hadn’t reacted, all because Nameless had thrown a piece of ice. And her energy couldn’t distinguish the danger it posed, because it had been *created from her own astral power*.

“You win this one, Alice.

“But I’ve seen your weak spot. I’ll stop you next time.”

It was as though she could hear Nameless laughing as he escaped.

“Lady Alice.”

“...There’s no issue.”

It wasn’t as though she had shown him her entire arsenal of weapons.

“Let’s get back. I’m afraid we were running a fool’s errand coming to this place.”

Shanorotte’s subordinates had probably been transported to a different campground.

And she still hadn’t seen Iska.

...I wonder if I was just mistaken.

...Maybe only Mismis was dispatched, and her subordinates stayed at the Imperial capital?

Though she couldn’t think that was the case, it wasn’t as though Alice had a firm grasp on their army regulations.

Where in the world could Iska have been?

“Ugh. This was all useless. I don’t know if it was because of that astrologer or whatever, but I did things believing in it...like that he was actually nearby!” Alice hollered as she kicked the ice at her feet as hard as she could.

“Where are you, Iska?!”

3

The blast of flaming air made the canyon tremble as soot blew up in a dense cloud. The heat wave from the missile that had exploded in the Nebulis base reflected off the cliffs and rushed on, as though it were echoing toward the bottom of the canyon.

The whole area was covered in fine ash. The only constant was the vortex, which continued to emit a faint glow.

“Elimination completed,” muttered the girl with black hair and a blindfold.

She was the purebred Kissing Zoa Nebulis.

Using her astral power of thorns, she’d reformed the short-range missile and made it detonate over Iska’s head.

“.....” The one thing that piqued Kissing’s interest was the pair of swords that swordsman carried.

It was the first time she had encountered anything that wasn’t affected by the thorns, which had even been able to erase the blast of the missile. But by now, the swords had been blown to smithereens on impact. There was no way for an Imperial soldier—not even a mage—to avoid the bombardment from the missile at such a close distance.

“Ha...ha-ha-ha... Wow!” the blond mage yelled, turning away from the dusty scene. “That was spectacular, Lady Kissing! Just when I thought you were cornered by the Imperial soldier, you’d already created another trap to ensnare him, all in the realm of your calculations. To put down that detestable soldier with a loathsome Imperial weapon! Amusing!”

“Kindred Shanorotte.”

With the triumphant subordinate behind her, the black-haired purebred didn't even turn around. She said only one more thing: “Report it.”

“Yes, ma'am. At once! I'll tell them that you defeated the Imperial assassin and—”

“*Who* were you supposed to have defeated?”

Rising out of a cloud of dust was a human silhouette. Eventually, they could hear the faint tapping of footsteps coming from beyond the veil of soot.

“...Impossible! How did you survive that explosion?” Shanorotte screamed, anger and fear apparent in her voice.

As even the purebred stood stock-still in amazement, the Imperial soldier emerged from the ashy dust with a pair of swords in hand. Iska had once again come to stand before the vortex.

“Mismis's subordinate. What are you? How did you come out of that explosion unharmed—?”

“Unharmed? As if.” Iska used the back of his hand to wipe away the blood from the corner of his mouth.

He'd probably easily been thrown back several dozen yards from the impact. His whole body had slammed into the rock surface, but Iska had managed to stay conscious, and that was the luckiest thing out of his bout of misfortune.

“Iska—”

“Captain, stay behind me.” When the captain squeaked out with a quiet voice, Iska kept his back facing her as he nodded.

Kissing observed them from beginning to end. She didn't say anything out loud, but Iska was sure he saw the moment her expression turned grim behind her blindfold.

“You look like you're out of the loop. Didn't Alice tell you? I thought you were from the Nebulis bloodline.”

“.....Ali...ce...? You mean Aliceliese...,” Kissing muttered.

Up until this point, she hadn't had an interest in any of Iska's comments. She reacted to Iska for the first time.

"These swords each have their own power," Iska started, talking about the one black and one white blade in his two hands.

He had been prepared to believe the powers of the swords would be common knowledge to the Nebulis Sovereignty, but the purebred in front of him seemed uninformed by Alice about its powers.

"The white astral sword can release what the black one intercepts."

"...?"

"I'm sure you know, Kissing. There's a reason why you didn't hesitate to launch the missile—even though we were at the same spot with the potential to die from the blast—"

At that time, this purebred had invoked two astral attacks at once, even though Iska was right in front of her.

"First, you reformed the missile for it to explode. But that would be suicide. You would have been caught in the blast, too."

"....."

"Which is why you commanded the thorns to dissolve the blast coming in your direction."

Kissing and Shanorotte had avoided the blast.

As a result, only the Imperial soldiers would have been caught in its fiery fury. That was the certain victory that this witch had thought up.

...Which is why I used the same defense.

...I released the thorns with my white astral sword and erased the explosion.

But when he'd scrambled to find this method of defense, he wasn't overcome by relief—but fear.

"Kissing." He turned to face the black-haired girl, boring into the eyes covered by the blindfold. "I told you about my astral swords, so I'd like you to answer a question."

“...?”

“*Who taught you how to do that?*”

“...gh.” The witch shook.

“Reusing an Imperial missile wasn’t something you could think of on the spot. Even if you had, you never would have been able to go through with it. If you were late with your astral attack by a second or even a tenth of a second, you would have also been caught up in the blast.”

But Kissing hadn’t hesitated to execute it. She’d tried to defeat her foe using that self-destructive method—absolutely confident that she would be able to evade the blast.

“You trained, didn’t you? To learn that suicidal behavior?”

“.....”

“Who trained you in that atrocious way and when?”

It was a demonic idea. There had to be someone who had gone as far as to teach this teenage girl that merciless technique.

“.....Y..... Yo..... Yo.....”

There was a sudden change in her. Until that point, Kissing had been unshakable, but now she bent over, clutching her blindfold in both hands.

“Y... Y... You’ve...”

“What?”

“You’ve touched on classified information.” She yanked down her blindfold. “And I must eliminate all those who ask and find this out.”

Her eyelids were bare to the world—where her astral crest had manifested. Which was when Iska saw the crest *move as though it were alive*.

“What?!”

It was writhing, looking like a pattern of tangled snakes—coiling and slithering.

“Th... Th... Thorns... Thorns..... My... All my thorns...!” She turned to the

heavens.

Between the cliffs, thorns buzzed around the crown of her head as though a black cloud. They obstructed the view of the sunlight before their eyes.

“That wasn’t all you had?”

More importantly, there were too many thorns built up over his head to be aimed at him. If they were going to be pouring down, they would undoubtedly hit her subordinate Shanorotte in the exchange.

“Is that what you want, Kissing?!”

“Release—Dragon of Thorns.”

Her silver thorns compressed into a gigantic snake, groaning and dipping toward the ground. Or it might have been suitable to call it a serpentine dragon made entirely of thorns.

As its tail squirmed and scraped against the cliff, its rocky surface began to melt into nothing.

“—” Holding onto his astral swords, Iska dashed toward the witch.

And as if anticipating his next moves, the thorny dragon reared its head, standing in front of Kissing as though to protect her—as though it was its master’s guardian.

If it was a gathering of the astral thorns, then anything that touched the colossal dragon would probably be annihilated. It was too large for one person to face alone.

“I shouldn’t have expected any less from Nebulis’s bloodline...”

Those who were called witches were ones to fear. Make no mistake: The Empire was wrong to have persecuted and treated them inhumanely. But if this was the extent of their power, Iska could sympathize with the feelings of those who feared them.

“A normal human would never be able to win against a mage. That’s true for me, too. I’m not going to just arm wrestle with you. I need to use another method, a different way of defeating you that isn’t through force—” Iska leaped not toward Kissing but to the cliff that caught her eye.

“All I can do is fight for my life.”

His feet reached the rock formation and leaped again, landing on the boulder behind her.

“.....Huh?” A scowl formed on Kissing’s closed eyes.

Just when she had thought he would attack, he had hid behind the shadow of a gigantic rock. She certainly couldn’t see Iska, but he also wouldn’t be able to attack her from this position.

On the other side of things, Kissing’s dragon could eliminate his hiding spot just by touching it. If she did that, he would have nowhere to run.

“Eliminate it,” the witch ordered.

He was aiming right for that moment.

“Awaken!” Iska yelled from beyond the rock, using his white astral sword.

He’d ordered it to regenerate Kissing’s thorns.

“And then make it disappear!”

A silver light pierced through the boulder. The white astral sword had regenerated Kissing’s attack, releasing thorns to pierce and hollow out the rock until it constructed a tunnel only a single person could get through.

He’d made a direct line to Kissing.

He’d hid behind the rock as a decoy to make Kissing believe he couldn’t attack from that spot. However, Iska could go straight through this tunnel.

Just by running a few yards, he would be able to jump right at the witch’s chest.

“Ah!”

The defenseless purebred stood frozen in place. Iska passed through the tunnel and closed the distance between them as the witch pointed at him and ordered the astral energy to counterattack— “.....Huh?!”

“It’s useless.” He ran through the boulder, launching right into the shocked witch’s chest, whispering to her.

The astral power of thorns could not move. That was because Kissing herself had already told it to erase the boulder that Iska was hiding behind.

Once she had issued an order, she had to cancel it.

By the time Kissing had realized that, Iska had already reached her.

“You don’t have astral energy to protect you anymore.”

She’d already depleted all her thorns by creating the gigantic snake. Because she had shifted all her astral powers to attacking, she had none left to automatically guard her.

...Your energy is amazing. I’ll give you that.

...But that’s why humans resort to methods other than force.

He’d used the natural features of the canyon against the astral power and fully reversed the situation—all while facing a witch of immense power.

Iska had used wisdom and finesse to outdo her.

“—”

“You’re strong. It’s true that you can flaunt your power and most humans will cower in fear and do whatever you want... But you know...” He brought up his astral sword. “You can’t use that power and expect to easily win at everything.”

The loud sound of the sword’s fall echoed.

The girl with black hair slowly collapsed to the ground.

She had fainted.

And the lightning witch must have realized their loss—or scrambled to escape from the snake—but she’d already made her exit.

Only three of them were left—Iska, Captain Mismis, and the unconscious purebred, Kissing.

“...So that’s it. Now we just need to deal with the vortex.”

It was a spring bubbling with astral energy, gathering light at the hole in the canyon as if a hot spring. The spray from it even now floated up like bubbles into the sky.

“Iska!” Captain Mismis staggered as she jogged to him. “I’m glad you’re okay! I believed you would all come!”

“Don’t get too worked up, Captain. It’s rocky around here, so if you run—”

“Auuuhhh?!”

“You’ll trip... Welp, you fell before I could even warn you. Okay, look, please get ahold of yourself.” He took the hand of his captain, who had shrieked so cutely, and pulled her up to her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“...N-no. I’m fine, but the other units are still held as prisoners. What happened to Jhin and Nene?”

“They should come to meet us soon. Even if it’s just us, we need to hide somewhere.”

At that moment, there weren’t any astral corps around the vortex.

In fear of the Imperial missiles, the Nebulis soldiers had temporarily evacuated for the most part, but Iska was wary of the lightning witch Shanorotte, who had disappeared somewhere out of sight when Kissing the purebred had been defeated.

...She was hyper-obsessed with Captain Mismis before.

...Will she really give it up?

There was the possibility for her to bring the others in the base to them and come back for a counterattack. If that happened, that would mean trouble.

“Let’s hide behind one of those buildings or something. After that, we’ll need to negotiate with the Sovereignty to trade the captured captains. That’s not in my domain, so I’ll leave that to you, Captain Mismis.”

“A—a trade? But a deal needs... Oh! Right!” Mismis raised her voice when she understood the look that Iska flashed her.

She redirected her attention to the purebred on the ground—a witch from the bloodline of Nebulis, more than enough to establish an exchange for the Imperial units and then some.

“I got it; leave it to me!”

“Please. I’ll take that purebred on my back and—”

“That would be annoying.”

He heard a voice, sensed a presence, and then felt a sharp pain run through his back.

“...Ugh..... Guh...!”

“Iska?!”

Even as he collapsed on the ground, Iska unsheathed his astral sword, softening the landing on his knee. He flipped around to see a strange man in all-black formal wear holding a knife smeared with blood. His face was concealed by a metal mask.

“In accordance with Shanorotte’s report, I see. I’m surprised—twofold.” The masked man gazed intently at his knife, which he wielded with a reverse grip. “I was planning on giving you one good stab in the back, but you twisted your body out of the way—all in the span of a single instant. Terrific reflexes. Good range of movement, too.”

“...Who are you?” Anguish leaked into his question as Iska bit his lip in severe pain.

If he had been a second too late, he would have been skewered. He was lucky to have been able to detect the presence of the man and dodge his attack. Iska had narrowly avoided being horrifically stabbed.

But when had the man appeared?

It was almost as though he hadn’t made a sound as he had overtaken Iska’s back.

“Two. I didn’t think you would be able to overpower Kissing to this magnitude. I’ll have to take this as a lesson to be wary of dangers other than the Saint Disciples.” The man held the purebred in one of his hands. “But that’s all for today—because I haven’t finished tinkering around with this girl. When she’s ‘complete,’ you can come by again to have some more fun.”

“...You think we’ll let you get away?”

The man was holding Kissing. He was an unidentified sorcerer, but it wasn’t as

though they could let him run off with the girl.

“We’ll settle things here and—”

“Maybe you should be more worried about your captain?” he suggested before his entire silhouette wobbled—slipping out of sight before Iska’s eyes.

When he reappeared, the masked man was far from him, materializing right next to the captain.

“Captain Mismis!”

“...What?”

“And now I will take my leave. I hope we meet again, Imperial warrior of unknown name.”

There was a dull *thump* when the masked man kicked Mismis. Her body flew into the air as it slung back into a gaping, glowing hole. In other words, he kicked her into the vortex.

“You—?!” Iska shouted.

The masked man and Kissing vanished as the unconscious captain sank into the spring overflowing with astral energy—as though flung into a volcanic opening brimming with lava.

She plunged—pitching back into the core under the mantle. Once she sank down to that point, there would be no way of saving her. Because of that, Iska didn’t take a moment to hesitate.

“Captain!” He dove into the torrent of astral energy, throwing himself into the vortex.

His vision filled with light.

As the inside raged with the intensity of a storm, he managed to make out the voices of the others in his unit.

“Iska?! Hold up...!”

“Iska!”

And right before everything was covered in an astral glow...

...Iska saw someone watching him tumble into the vortex.

The Ice Calamity Witch Alice.

“...Alice?!”

Why? Why was she here—yelling something unintelligible at him, backlit by the sunset?!

Leaving behind her attendant, Rin, Alice sprinted and stretched her hand out to him.

“—”

At the same time, Iska tumbled into the vortex.

“Iska?!” Alice had bellowed his name when she came to her senses, forgetting that she was in the base camp for the House of Zoa.

...What happened?

...What kind of battle are you telling me occurred here?

The camp stood in black soot. The roofs of buildings had melted. Even the barricade that had originally closed off the vortex had disappeared.

And Alice witnessed the young female captain and Iska fall directly into the exposed fountain.

The vortex was a hole that reached down tens of thousands of yards underground into the mantle of the planet. Iska probably could have clung to its walls and clambered up the hole.

But with the captain?

Iska wasn't the type to leave behind his superior and return alive by himself.

But in the storming vortex, Alice couldn't say with conviction that he could climb up to the surface with another person on his back. They were heading to the core of the planet, from which they would never return.

If they had experienced astral energy, they might have been able to surf its currents, but if they hadn't, they would sink into the depths of the planet—and never rise back up again.

What if Iska disappeared forever? She didn't want that. She hadn't settled things with him yet.

"...You've got to be kidding me. Wait right there, Iska!"

"Lady Alice, what are you doing?!"

She ran on impulse, leaving behind Rin standing next to her. Alice kicked off the ground, then launched herself into the vortex.

And down she went, chasing after Iska.

4

The current glistened.

...A transparent green.

...Beautifully radiant.

He was falling into the depths of the vortex as it surged with light coming from the mantle deep below. Iska lost his senses as he took in the glittering spectacle. The particles of light were about the size of embers—tens of thousands, millions of them had gathered in a gush of wind and trembled as they headed to the surface.

This was astral energy. Somewhere in this vortex was the astral spirit—the power that the Nebulis Sovereignty and the Empire were desperate to obtain.

But he didn't have time to search for it.

"Captain!"

She was on the other side of the current, farther down than Iska.

She didn't respond. From the pain of the masked man's kick and the jolt of falling into the vortex, Mismis had lost consciousness. Because of that, she was pulled into the deep hole by gravity.

"Gah...!" Iska stretched out his hand and yanked Mismis by the belted strap on her back with one hand, piercing the wall with the blade of his astral sword. He clung to the wall.

...I need to climb to the surface.

...Which would be tough under the perfect circumstances. What a task.

The stab wound on his back throbbed in pain—on top of this turbulence.

With Mismis on his back, clinging to the wall took everything he had. If he made one wrong move, his hand would slip, and he would plunge down the wrong way again.

“...I shouldn’t have gone to the casino... This is what happens after using up all your luck...!” With his fingers locked in a dimple in the wall, Iska pulled himself up.

When he strained his shoulders, Iska could feel the wound on his back gaping wider.

“...Iska!” Someone was calling his name.

Had Captain Mismis woken up? But there was no change in the captain on his back. Had the rushing current caused him to hear an auditory hallucination? He reasoned with himself.

That’s when he heard the dignified voice of a young woman being blown around in the vortex. “Answer me!”

“Alice?!”

The princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty, Aliceliese sank into the current as though underwater.

She wasn’t a mirage.

Right before his eyes was Alice—the one he swore he’d seen right before falling into this hole.

“...You. Where have you been?” yelled the girl with blond hair, whipped around by the raging torrent. “I was looking for you! I knew you were here, and I went all the way to the Imperial camp trying to find you! But you weren’t there! I was hoping we would run into each other on the way back! But I couldn’t spot you anywhere...and of all things, that astrologer said you were close by, so...”

“An astrologer?”

“...It’s nothing.” Alice’s face flushed red—but only for a moment. With her entire body thrashed by the current, Alice wore a desperate expression as she offered her hand. “Hang on tight.”

“...What?”

“Hurry! Even I... You have to understand that humans cannot control the energy in this vortex. We need to get back aboveground before the wind picks up!”

What was happening?

This was a battlefield. If it was a neutral city, he could understand that they couldn’t fight, but in this place, they were enemies.

“I have one condition. As soon as we get to the surface, we *continue our battle*. I’ve been searching for you high and low to finish what we started.”

“—”

“Well, what do you say?”

“If that’s the condition, I have no objections.” He nodded without pause.



Their fight had been put on hold by the Founder Nebulis. It was one that Iska would not have been able to avoid.

“Promise?” Alice asked, offering her hand to him.

He took it in his, feeling her warmth as they touched.

What he noticed most was the softness of her skin—supple and lithe to the point that he worried it might vanish if he gripped it too firmly.

She was the strongest class of mage, feared as the Ice Calamity Witch, and yet somehow so delicate to the touch.

“.....”

They hadn’t noticed during their intense fight against the Founder Nebulis, focusing every fiber of their being on each other. And for a brief moment, Iska and Alice were both at a loss for words upon contact.

Iska was left speechless by the soft hands that Alice had from growing up as a princess.

Alice was tongue-tied by the ruggedness of Iska’s palms, which were forged by his training as a swordsman.

They were holding hands out of necessity. Which begged the question: Why were they blanking out?

“Uh—”

“Um—”

In that moment, when they opened their mouths...

So E lu emne xel noi Es—Accept me.

The current burst as if by volcanic eruption. The stream of astral energy spurted with a volatile force that increased like a giant storm as it surged to the surface.

“This power. *The astral spirit is close.....* Oh no! I don’t think I can control it!”

“Alice?!”

With her hand stretched out to him, Alice was blasted up to the surface with

an immense power that even a mage couldn't control. What was this raging wind? What possessed enough power to release this much energy? Was it close? Was it coming closer?

In that case, it had to be...

"It can't be the astral spirit—!"

At his feet was a colossal cluster of light that sent shivers down his spine.

And before he could confirm its identity, Iska and Mismis were both rushed to the surface.

"Iska, you good?!"

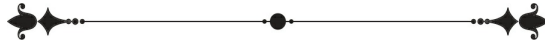
"Iska! Captain Mismis!"

Jhin and Nene drove over to where Iska had been blown onto the surface.

A few minutes ticked by.

Far beyond Unit 907 of the Third Division, the vortex and its illusory glow were extinguished by the Empire's next missile.

EPILOGUE 1



As Inseparable as Two Sides of a Coin

The Star Spire in the Nebulis Sovereignty.

It was the closest garden in the world to the sky. Alice reclined absentmindedly on a pure-white bench in the hanging garden that smelled of dewy flowers.

“.....” She held an empty watering can, already finished with her daily chores. She was splayed out in the chair as though she were all out of strength.

Was that a look of annoyance on her face?

They had passed by each other just as she thought she had finally found Iska.

She had witnessed him diving into the vortex, not heeding Rin’s warnings to stop. Alice had plunged in after Iska, thinking she’d finally run into him at last.

“That astral energy is to blame. I can’t believe it peaked and surged right at that moment...”

There had been a turbulence in the astral energy that had been so great even Alice couldn’t control it. That must mean the astral spirit had risen so much that it had been incredibly close. And in its aftermath, Alice and Iska had been separated once again.

...When we got blown up to the surface, we were pulled apart by the impact.

...Which means Iska must have gotten out of there. So at the very least, he’s safe.

But this meant their promise to settle matters had all come to naught.

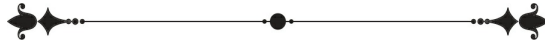
“Ugh, seriously. Out of all things. I can’t believe the astral spirit got in my way! Truly horrible timing!” Alice hollered as she waved the watering can in circles. “I thought we’d finally meet again. Iska, I’ll have a battle with you next time. You

better stay alive until you fight me!”

Plus, she’d missed another chance to return the borrowed handkerchief.

That’s what was on her mind.

EPILOGUE 2



The Astral Jackpot

The Imperial capital of Yunmelngen.

In a meeting room on the base of Sector Three.

“Boss.”

“...Yes?”

“Negative two hundred points.”

“I’m so sorry!” Captain Mismis groveled on the ground as Jhin crossed his arms in front of her.

“Negative one hundred points for putting yourself in mortal danger when you were captured by the traitor Shanorotte. And then another negative one hundred for falling into the vortex and fainting while we were fighting for our lives trying to rescue you.”

“...B-but...that weird guy in the mask kicked me, and I had an ouchie...”

“Yeah, that’s right. Which is why Iska ended up having to jump into that hole, too.”

“.....I’m sorry for causing so much trouble, especially for Iska.” The captain seemed to wither away, shrinking in size.

With Nene, Iska witnessed this scene, hunkered down on a seat at the edge of the table. The captain bowed her head repeatedly to her subordinates.

“And you, Iska? How are you feeling?” Nene asked.

“I feel fine.”

For all the winds whipping him in the vortex, Iska hadn’t experienced any pain when he’d returned to the surface. Though he had been separated from Alice

after their brief reunion, there was probably nothing he could do about it in that situation.

...Well, if I had to be nitpicky, I guess I have back cramps.

...I only narrowly escaped death because there wasn't any poison on that knife.

Coming to save the purebred Kissing, the masked man had appeared behind Iska without any indication and vanished without a trace.

Did he have the astral power to teleport?

Even recalling those events made Iska's spine tense up. He hadn't suffered a fatal wound for one reason: Luck was on his side. He'd had the smidgen of a feeling that something was wrong and acted accordingly. He wasn't sure he would be able to do it again.

How many unknown purebreds like that man lurked within the Nebulis Sovereignty?

"—"

"Oh...oh no!" Captain Mismis screeched, planting a hand to her left shoulder. "I need to hurry and turn in the mission report..."

"I already turned it in a while ago."

"I love you, Jhin! I'll treat you to some barbecue!"

"No need. And while we're on the topic, eat a few vegetables. Stop eating meat all the time," Jhin answered coldly. "The astral corps retreated. I don't know if the missile hit the vortex directly, but it's not erupting light anymore. Now we need to deal with that purebred Kissing and that masked guy who kicked the boss down the vortex."

There had been no mention in the report of Shanorotte, the Imperial army captain who had betrayed them. After all, the Saint Disciple Nameless should have already reported that to headquarters.

"Hey, Captain Mismis?" Nene had been sitting quietly, staring at the captain. "What happened to your shoulder? You've kept your hand on it the whole time. Want me to put a bandage compress on it?"

“...Huh? Oh sure, just a little.”

“From when you fell into the vortex?”

“...Oh, n-no, Nene! It doesn’t hurt... It just...” She scratched her left shoulder over the battle uniform, speaking in a soft voice that seemed as though it would disappear. She must have been really embarrassed. “...It’s been itchy. It started this morning.”

“Oh, a heat rash. You must have sweat when you overslept.”

“That’s not what it is, Jhin! I’m sure that it’s just a bugbite! Listen up. Girls can’t get heat rashes. We don’t get acne or dry skin, either. Got that?”

“A girl? You’re twenty-two.”

“*JHIN!*”

“Okay, okay, just calm down, Captain. You’re still young... Nene, go get the medicine.”

“Okay. Anti-inflammation meds.”

Iska soothed his superior, who was smacking the desk.

On the other side, Nene was tugging off the top to the emergency kit equipped in the meeting room. She picked out a disinfectant spray and anti-inflammation cream.

“All right, Captain, take off your jacket. If you leave a bugbite alone, it’ll start to swell.”

“...Ugh. A bugbite. How embarrassing.” She hung the jacket on her chair, stripping down to a lightweight white shirt, folding up her sleeve, and baring her left shoulder—*where there was an emerald-green pattern.*

“Huh?”

It wasn’t a swollen, red bugbite...but a strange pattern like a tattoo. That is, if tattoos could glow.

Everyone in that meeting room understood what it was immediately.

It was the astral crest of a witch.

The mark signifying that its host was infected by the planet's unfathomable energy. And it was clearly emblazoned on Mismis's left shoulder.

"....." She cast her lovely eyes down at her own shoulder and blinked. "...Uh, ummm. Ah-ha-ha... That's weird. I've never seen such a weird bugbite before."

With her right hand, she rubbed at her shoulder vigorously as though trying to scrub off dirt until her shoulder turned bright red. Not that there was any way she would be able to get it off. An astral crest was the product of a power *inside* her body.

Once it possessed someone, it could never be removed.

".....Uh...um... Huh...um, ah, ah....." Tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

Her whole body trembled, and she opened her mouth as though she desperately wanted to say something. Her face was locked into a smile.

"Ah, um... This... Isn't...that.....?"

"Captain." Iska didn't say anything else as he held her close.

"....."

"Calm down. It's okay. Get yourself together."

She was panicking.

Of course. Even as Iska held her and tried to remain composed, he couldn't think of anything else to say.

...I need to relax, too. This is a super-simple situation.

...It's unprecedented but not impossible.

For the last century, they'd known that people exposed to astral energy became mages—or witches and sorcerers. And of course, this was common knowledge. After all, this had happened in the Imperial city of Yunmelngen—the origin of the current-day witches and sorcerers.

"Captain, just to confirm: Do you have any idea when it happened?"

".....Uh, uh..."

"At the vortex, obviously. As far as timing and logic go," Jhin answered,

unable to just watch, “you must have seen the astral spirit before you were blasted out of the vortex. And that possessed the boss. That’s gotta be it.”

The sniper tended to spit out his comments with abandon, but in this moment, his voice was tender.

“Ninety-nine percent of the general populace won’t get infected, regardless of the strength of the astral power. That said, the susceptibility to infections depends on the person. We have no idea if it’s genetic like alcohol or drug tolerance. The boss just happened to be one of the compatible ones.”

“...I—I...” Mismis slumped over, crouching right on the floor. “...Did...I... become a witch...?”

“You’re right on the money. Jackpot. I mean, you’ve got the astral crest. Well, the only way to be absolutely sure is to have the guys at the research institute take a look.”

“W-we can’t do that, Jhin!” Nene ran over, ponytail swaying, and spread her arms as though protecting Mismis. “If the Imperial research institute finds out that she became a witch, they’ll execute her!”

“If she turns herself in, they’ll only give her lifetime imprisonment.”

“We can’t let either happen! If we lose the captain...” Nene hung her head.

If Captain Mismis was shackled, the whole unit would be disbanded. Iska immediately guessed what was unsaid—Jhin, too.

“We have two options. But both are hell.” Jhin sighed. “We can keep quiet and let the boss continue being a captain. If the crest is ever brought to light, she’ll be treated as a spy and executed on the spot. They already know she’s close to Captain Shanorotte. Headquarters won’t offer her any mercy.”

On the other hand, if she turned herself in, the unit would still be disbanded. And if they kept silent, the unit would be done for the moment someone outed Mismis’s astral crest.

...Think.

...How can we get through this?

Consider the extenuating circumstances.

Thinking back on it, he realized the vortex had ceased its volatile eruption because Captain Mismis had sapped it of its energy. Taking into account that the Empire wouldn't have been able to do anything if the Nebulis Sovereignty's agents had taken its energy for themselves, they could make a case that Captain Mismis had sacrificed herself in order to nip this problem in the bud.

...No, that won't work. That argument is too weak.

...At best, it'll only lessen her sentence if she turns herself in.

In that case, he had to let her decide.

"Captain." Iska crouched and looked into his superior's eyes. "We'll follow your lead. Tell us what you want."

"...How...?"

"If you turn yourself in, you won't be executed."

She stared back at him with anxious eyes.

"We'll help as much as we can to reduce your sentence. If we beg your friend Risyra, you might be able to get away with house arrest for the rest of your time in a remote placement outside the Imperial capital."

Then, there was the other option: being an Imperial subject while continuing to deceive the Empire.

"Or you can choose to continue being our captain."

If they got caught, none of them would be able to talk their way out of it.

The unit would be disbanded, and in this outcome, it wouldn't just be Mismis who would be punished. The others would be prosecuted, too.

"...But if we get caught, you'll also be in trouble."

"Don't worry about us," Jhin replied curtly, continuing to cross his legs. "What do you want to do now, boss? Let's start there. We're your subordinates. You say what you want. We'll follow through. No questions asked."

"....." She ruffled her hair, clearing her throat in an apparent attempt to keep herself from sobbing. "I..."

She touched her left shoulder with her right hand to hide the emblem of a

witch—a mark that would never disappear.

“We don’t want to part ways, Captain... We just got everyone back together...”



“—”

“Can...I really...?”

“Yes,” Iska answered, putting his own right hand on hers. “You can. If you say you want it, there’s no reason for us to disband.”

“...Are you sure, Iska?”

“Of course. We’ll keep this a secret from headquarters. Not just while you’re part of the unit, either. We’ll do it for as long as you live in the Empire.”

“O-okay...!” With some hesitation, Captain Mismis nodded earnestly.

“I shouldn’t have to say this, boss, but you can’t tell anyone other than us. Even if you think you can trust another captain, if they let this slip, then it’s all over.”

“Medical examinations might be a problem. Do you want me to go with you and help you?” Nene asked after Jhin had his say. “Ex-Captain Shanorotte had that skin-colored sticker to conceal her crest. We might be able to use that. We can have the captain wear one of those—”

“We just have to do the impossible.” With folded arms, Jhin was looking absentmindedly at the ceiling. “Our biggest concern is that Saint Disciple Risya. She’s already appointed as a direct adviser under the Lord, and we can never tell what she’s thinking. She’s collected a butt ton of data on other people, but she never reveals her tricks.”

“I agree! Plus, she’s friendly with you. If she finds out that the captain is hiding something—”

“Okay, Unit 907! How have you been?!”

The lock to the room was busted open to reveal none other than the Saint Disciple in question, who sauntered toward them with long strides.

“Risya?!” Mismis’s voice cracked.

Jhin stood immediately as though to hide her body, and Nene quickly put Mismis’s jacket back on her from behind him.

They did everything to keep Mismis’s astral crest from being in sight.

If Risya had seen it even for a second, it would all be over.

“Wh... Wh-wh... What brings you over h-h-h-here...?”

“Hmm. Well, your unit was the only one that couldn’t come to train for the special mission. I read the report on Mudor Canyon. Seems you had a lot going on over there yourselves.” As the commanding officer for this mission, the Saint Disciple narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, and how risqué, Mismis. Flinging off your jacket and showing some skin? Were you trying to seduce Isk and Jhin-Jhin?”

“That’s right. And what did you want to tell us about the special mission?”

Jhin was the one to reply as he looked up at the Saint Disciple. “I’m sure it’s not good news. Did you decide when you’ll have us train for the special mission?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t come all this way to talk about something boring.”

The Saint Disciple looked at Iska, Nene, Jhin, and finally Captain Mismis, who was crouched down. Her beguiling lips squinched up into a smile.

“I came to tell you everything about the special mission. I’m going to have all four of you infiltrate the Nebulis Sovereignty. Long story short, the target is Nebulis IIX. Good luck.”

“...Wait a second.” Iska didn’t even think this through as he put the brakes on Risya’s announcement.

That name. He could think only that he’d misheard it.

“You have to be joking.”

“No, I’m serious. And this is an order. You don’t have the right to refuse,” she sang.

Risya In Empire had given them an unshakable order.

“Your special mission is to infiltrate the Sovereignty. Then capture the current Nebulis queen. Now, how about we have some fun?”

Afterword

An astral crest. Is a mark of bad luck? Or a jackpot?

Let's talk about stargazing.

For years and years, there have been researchers studying astrology in every corner of the world. To think people everywhere all believed the stars in the sky had the divine power to influence our lives, even from a great distance. What a mystery.

What would happen if the stars weren't in the sky but the ground below?

If their divine will came bubbling up from below, it would have to be a bigger influence on our lives...which motivated this plot about the struggle for the vortex.

Now then, thank you for picking up the second volume of *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World*! With a focus on the vortex, I wrote the story around the theme of missing opportunities to reconnect.

Has this been ordained by the stars? Or was this a cruel trick of fate?

In the first volume, Iska and Alice had their fair share of chance meetings. This time, the plot is about the pair not crossing paths, regardless of their desperate attempts to reunite.

This book features key information about the Saint Disciples, purebreds, the Eight Great Apostles, and the three bloodlines of Nebulis, with some details about the ulterior motives of the Empire and the Nebulis Sovereignty.

The story will, of course, continue to progress from here.

Let's discuss future developments.

Here's an update. The first volume of this series has been doing well, thanks to your support. It seems there's enough backing for me to complete the series,

which really pleases me. I'd like to use this opportunity to thank you!

And to my managing editor K and illustrator Ao Nekonabe: Thank you for your assistance. I would be incredibly blessed if you continued to work by my side.

About the third volume. If things go well, I believe it will come out in November. Which I realize is a little while away, but I'm excited for you to read it. In exchange for your patience, I promise to present you with my best work.

And while you're waiting, I'll be publishing another book. Let me introduce you to...

Published by MF Bunko J with an anticipated release date of July 25

Why Doesn't Anyone Else Remember My World? by Kei Sazane

An epic about a boy who is forgotten by the rest of the world, fighting against angels, demons, mythical beasts, and other powerful species as he tries to restore "true" history in a world where it's rewritten.

I'm sure there may be some people who are familiar with this title—because it's advertised in the ads and the partial dust jacket of this book.

It will be published on Tuesday, July 25.

I was as dedicated to working on this book as *Our Last Crusade*. I'm hoping that I can work on both as my main books this year. I would be overjoyed if the readers of this series would pick up the new one.

(It will be published five days after this volume of *Our Last Crusade*, meaning it may already be lining shelves at bookstores!)

I don't have many pages left.

This is the story of the swordsman Iska and Alice the witch—a tale of a pair who sometimes quarrel and sometimes stick by each other. It follows their journey and the destiny that awaits them.

The real story has only just begun. I would love for you to watch over the tale of fated stars that revolve around the duo. This epilogue featured Mismis hitting an enormous "jackpot" and the details of their elusive special mission. I hope you're waiting for the third volume with high expectations. The ulterior motives of the two countries are going to wreak havoc on everything, resulting

in a terrible mess.

I'll see you soon on either July 25 with the publication of *Why Doesn't Anyone Else Remember My World?* (MF Bunko J) or in November in the third volume of *Our Last Crusade*. My wish is that I see you in both.

Written from me to you on a hot summer day,

Kei Sazane

<https://twitter.com/sazanek> (I tweet about updates on publications from time to time.)

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